



University of Trento-School of International Studies

Help that Hinders?

EXPLORING THE WAYS DONORS SHAPE LOCAL
COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL
NGO PROJECTS

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the impact of donor organizations on NGOs' efforts to foster local community participation in environmental projects, by analyzing how conditions on project funding affect a sample of South African NGOs.

Numerous NGOs take environmental justice as a key tenet of their work. Yet, promoting environmental justice is not an easy task to perform. Aside from cultural, political and social contingencies peculiar to specific contexts, there are external constraints that can help or hinder NGOs' efforts, among which resource-dependency dynamics stand out as particularly relevant. In fact, donors hold power over NGOs, who must stick to specific conditions to secure their support.

My aim is to understand what conditions and what type of donors facilitate or hinder community participation —a basic condition for achieving environmental justice— in environmental projects, where hindrances are exemplified by the presence of NGOization dynamics. I analyze donors' guiding principles, eligibility criteria and monitoring and evaluation standards, delving into the provisions of five different funders that financially support local environmental projects in South Africa, classified according to their core values and organizational settings. Data are collected, coded, and analyzed with the help of NVIVO through a content analysis of calls for grants, project proposals, project reports, and semi-structured interviews to donors and NGO professionals.

In this study, I argue that donor organizations can facilitate community participation and avoid NGOization dynamics by acknowledging the existence of unequal power relations between them and the NGOs they fund and by taking measures to respond to NGOs demands. This study highlights the importance of long-term engagement and a relationship based on trust between donors and NGOs as key to creating alternative funding models that help secure the goals that local communities define. Moreover, this study also claims that donors' upward accountability has a weight in determining conditions on funds and eligibility criteria, and that many of the donors' virtuous practices originate from their independence from upward accountability measures.

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Introduction

The effects that flow from the grants of civil society donors are complex, and there are several examples that show their negative consequences. This thesis tries to shed light on one question central to these dynamics for the field of environmental justice: the question of how the donors' power over the NGOs they fund shapes their ability to meaningfully involve local communities in environmental projects.

To illustrate my point, I bring the example of the Southern African Faith Communities' Institute (SAFCEI), an environmental justice organization committed to support local communities in Southern Africa,¹ who addressed an open letter to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, accusing them of forcing local communities to adopt of unsustainable and harmful agricultural techniques. The letter says:

“While we are grateful to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (the Gates Foundation) for its commitment to overcoming food insecurity [...] we write out of grave concern that the Gates Foundation's support for the expansion of intensive industrial scale agriculture is deepening the humanitarian crisis [...] We ask that it [the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation] respects and supports locally defined, holistic approaches that enable agroecological transitions to sustainable food systems in Africa. These are based on regenerative farming methods that work with, rather than against biodiversity, for the equitable production and local marketing of nutritious food².”

Although the Gates Foundation has made considerable investments in the region to demonstrate their commitment to overcoming food insecurity, their support for intensive industrial scale agriculture has threatened the biodiversity of the region, and consequently the implementation of community-based agroecological approaches.

¹ <https://safcei.org/> last access 9/10/2022

² <https://safcei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Gates-Foundation-appeal-from-SAFCEI-African-faith-Leaders-September-2020.docx.pdf> last access 9/10/2022.

The situation sketched in this letter is a good illustration of the core issues addressed in this work: powerful development actors provide considerable resources to the global South to overcome priority issues such as food security; however, sometimes they do so by importing development models that are not shared by local people. This letter in particular describes the case of industrial monoculture farming and food processing, that encourages African farmers to adopt farming approaches based on a business model developed in a Western setting. This example shows why a focus on local communities is particularly important for investigating environmental justice questions.

This study is based on the assumption that donor organizations' rules and conditions have the power to shape the work of NGOs working on environmental projects. It hypothesizes that donors whose rules and conditions are based on western, neocolonial assumptions can significantly hamper the efforts of local NGOs, while donors' programs that give local NGOs the opportunity to design and implement environmental projects according to locally defined needs and priorities contribute to creating the conditions to achieve environmental justice. Taking local communities' participation as a prerequisite to achieve environmental justice, and NGOs as the intermediaries between donors' rules and conditions and local communities' needs and claims, this work explores which rules and which type of donors help or hinder local NGOs in their efforts to achieve environmental justice. Indeed, there is broad consensus about the power that donors hold over NGOs (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2006; Lister 2000). This power materializes in donors' rationales for funding, their eligibility conditions, the use that NGOs can make of donors' funds, and finally, their monitoring and evaluation requirements. However, the literature so far has failed to address how this power manifests itself in donors' rules and conditions, and which rules and conditions help or hinder NGOs in their efforts towards environmental justice.

I conceptualize environmental justice as an ideal outcome to strive for, based on Schlosberg's (2004, 517) three-dimensions — distributional, recognition, and procedural— that allows a plural yet unified theory and practice of justice. environmental justice should thus result in equity in the distribution of environmental risk, recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in

affected communities, and their participation in the processes which create and manage environmental projects.

The example of the Gates foundation referred to above concerns a large US organization with the power to secure a significant impact on the agricultural practices of a whole region. This thesis focuses on the funding practices not only of large donor organization but on donor organizations of various sizes that fund local NGOs engaged in community-based projects. Further, it specifically focuses on calls for grants aimed at such NGOs. Thus, it does not claim to evaluate the entirety of the strategies of large donors, but to unpack in detail the effects that might flow from particular programs.

The funds disbursed by the donors under analysis unquestionably have an impact on the work of their grantees and the local community they work with. In more detail, the focus of this work is on five donors with different backgrounds and organizational characteristics that fund South African NGOs engaged in environmental projects that promote local community participation. This study draws from the literature on NGOs, as it explores the way donors' conditions shape NGO action and agency (AbouAssi and Trent 2016; Andrews 2014); yet, theoretical concepts are drawn from the literature on environmental justice, especially in its procedural dimension, which values the recognition of the knowledge of local communities and their participation in decision-making processes (Schlosberg 2013; Bell, Carrick, and Carrick 2017; Schlosberg 2004) , and from the theory of NGOization (Roy 2015; Chahim and Prakash 2014; Choudry and Kapoor 2013) that identifies the professionalization, bureaucratization and projectization of civil society in the Global South as a problem linked to neoliberal globalization in various complex ways.

As explained in the above paragraphs, in this thesis I investigate the consequences of donors' rules and conditions on how environmental projects are carried out by looking at donor-NGO relationships. Indeed, NGOs are key actors in environmental governance and play a key role in achieving a community's goals because of the skills-transfer, lobbying, visibility and funds that they can provide. However, the relationships between local communities and NGOs can be challenging and power-laden, and NGOs can shape community decision-making processes in both intentional and non-intentional ways (Markham and Fonjong 2016; Kilby 2006; Mercer 2002). As well as their complex

relationships with local communities, NGOs enter into relationships with donor organizations, thus accepting to follow their rules in return for receiving the means to implement environmental projects. As this thesis' aim is to learn about how donor organizations shape NGOs work, I chose to investigate the relationships of these donors to local NGOs, as they are found to be generally more closely associated to the communities they serve than to donors (Kaldor 2003).

The observations presented in this introduction point to two key questions:

- What specific donor rules and conditions facilitate or hinder NGOs in fostering local communities' participation in environmental projects?
- How do the rules and conditions of different types of donors shape NGOs' efforts to foster local communities' participation in environmental projects?

These two questions hint at the puzzle that prompted this research and that set the stage for the empirical exploration: do donors, who are widely recognized as agents of neoliberal and neocolonial practices in the development literature, reinforce NGOization dynamics? Or do they, in some cases, counter them by actively and consciously trusting local actors and devolving decision-making power to them? The next sections address the literature that informs, and is in turn informed by, the present study.

Organization of the thesis

In chapter 1, I review the literature on Environmental governance and Environmental justice, as an overall motivation of the study and justification for focusing on community participation; I then discuss the definitions of participation and local community and review the literature on civil society and NGOs as contributors to community participation. I then review the elements as identified in the previous literature shaping relationships between NGOs and local communities (proximity/distance; cooperation/competition; resource-dependency dynamics and donors' rules). Finally, I discuss the NGOization argument as justification for a need to explore in detail donor-NGO relationships.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the research design and the methods employed in this work. The remaining chapters investigate the elements that can either facilitate or hinder NGOs' efforts towards local communities' participation in environmental projects, by looking at donors' rationales for funding (chapter 3), donors' eligibility criteria (chapter 4), the rules they impose on the use of funds (chapter 5), and finally, the accountability mechanisms (chapter 6).

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Environmental Governance and Environmental Justice

The governance of natural common-pool resources has always been challenging, and to succeed, it must be rooted in “well-designed, face-to-face processes of decision-making and accountability that are constructed from the bottom up and to serve the bottom (Sowman and Wynberg 2014, 14). Ostrom (1990) found that the users of shared natural resources can, and historically often have organized small-scale, collective institutions to efficiently manage commonly held resources. Collective-choice arrangements, accountable monitoring systems, and consistency with local environmental and cultural circumstances can indeed be the key to a successful governance of common resources. In this vein, community-based approaches to environmental governance have been found to be efficient in a number of success stories that have the common denominator of expressing context specificity and engagement with local institutions (Calisto Friant 2019; Marshall 2008).

Collective-choice arrangements, accountable monitoring systems, and consistency with local environmental and cultural circumstances can be the key to a successful governance of natural resources. The concept of governance has become a central theme in natural resources management, where it refers to the political, institutional and cultural frameworks adopted to control and coordinate the interests of diverse stakeholders (Sowman and Wynberg 2014). Governance is made of various discourses and interpretations and it encompasses the totality of instruments available to steer a society (Biermann et al. 2012; Young 2005). Governance is also the set of *rules* that shape the actions of the involved actors. The common feature of all definitions of governance is that its goal is to address social problems and create solutions through collective action, by involving a wide range of actors with diverging interests and by creating opportunities for dialogue, deliberation and empowerment. Governance thus comprises a collective dimension that implies the involvement of non-state actors and the overcoming of hierarchical structures towards more cooperative decision-making (Newig et al. 2019).

Environmental questions are complex issues that can best be solved through poly-centric governance approaches with the inputs of a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors. As it is widely acknowledged, conventional top-down or technocratic approaches to environmental governance have failed both communities and the environment (Sowman and Wynberg 2014). To enhance legitimacy and secure stakeholders' ownership and long-term commitment, multi-scale approaches and devolution of power are required, which are also generally incompatible with top-down management structures (Nanang, and Inoue, 2000). Local and community-based initiatives are increasingly put in place to return the stewardship of natural resources and the right to a safe environment to local communities. At the same time, local and community-based initiatives promote their empowerment, participation and inclusiveness. However, Bäckstrand (2010) argues that despite the fact that decentralized and participatory modes of environmental governance should benefit both environmental outcomes and the democratic quality of decision-making, the theoretical and empirical foundations of this assumption have been the object of little investigation. It is worth pointing out that social justice and environmental sustainability do not necessarily go hand in hand because, also depending on the priorities of the actors involved, one aspect can be favored over the other: effective environmental governance does not always have positive consequences in terms of poverty alleviation, social and gender equality and community agency. For example, practices referred to as green and blue grabbing (the appropriation of land and marine resources for conservation purposes), are generally designed to be conducive to increased protection of natural resources and ecosystems; however, they can also have the drawback of hampering or limiting people's access to those very resources that can be vital to them, with dire consequences for their traditional livelihoods and socio-economical systems (Sowman and Wynberg 2014, 351).

This dichotomy brings me to discuss efficiency and fairness. If effective governance refers to the achievement of the objectives that governance processes aim to secure—for example specific biodiversity conservation aims—the notion of good governance is normative and contextual to stakeholders' preferences, and thus very context-specific (Ngeta, 2014).

From an environmental justice perspective, the notion of good governance is promising only if it is used for exploring active and creative roles for non-state actors and for deepening democracy (Velicu and Kaika 2017). In accordance to primary stakeholders' preferences, ideals such as participation, accountability, and coherence, which are considered to be constituent of the notion of good (environmental) governance, should be adaptive and adapted, in order to provide nuanced and holistic approaches to understand both the natural resources systems and the social and cultural specificities of the communities involved in environmental governance processes (Paloniemi et al. 2015; Aylett 2010a). In this vein, global environmental endeavors should be reconciled to local level livelihood priorities and implemented in a context-sensitive way. Indeed, environmental justice literature claims that all stakeholders should participate and have a say in decision-making processes that concern the environment where they live and the natural resources they use (Schlosberg 2004; Bell and Carrick 2017). The capacity of bottom-up environmental governance to better address people's varied and sometimes divergent needs recalls the work of participatory democracy scholars, who advocate for direct forms of citizen participation in governance (Holmes and Scoones 2000). Indeed, when decisions are the results of inclusive and participatory processes, the outcome has broader support and is more likely to succeed (Sowman and Wynberg 2014). Local participation in decision-making processes is thus key in assuring fair, democratic and effective environmental governance and involves taking into consideration the points of view of different stakeholders.

Local communities' participation is undoubtedly an important element of good environmental governance, is encouraged by a number of diverse institutional bodies and is an advocated principle in a number of treaties and policy instruments, especially in natural resource management and decision-making in areas inhabited by local communities (Sowman and Wynberg 2014, 346).

However, participatory approaches sometimes only pay lip-service to the aim of promoting bottom-up and inclusive management of natural resources. Participation in itself, if reduced to basic stakeholder consultation or to passive reception of information by stakeholders, is not enough to ensure that the interests of communities are promoted, both in relation to the livelihood they want to follow and for what concerns their relationships with the natural resources they depend on. Indeed, used

without critical reflection and context sensitivity, concepts like recognition, participation and distribution can easily become little more than buzzwords (Velicu and Kaika 2017). As I show in the next sections, the involvement of local communities in a more sustainable governance of natural resources, and the local environmental and social struggles generated from people's mobilizations, are not necessarily two separate fields of investigation. In order to gain a better understanding of the interlinkages between environmental governance and grassroots environmental action, I now turn to a discussion on the notion of environmental justice.

The concept of environmental justice first emerged from anti-toxic campaigns and civil rights activism in the USA during the 1980es. These movements denounced the higher rates of environmental and health risks and burdens suffered by marginalized communities, and consequently, their claims related to the unequal allocation of environmental benefits and burdens along class, ethnic and gender lines (Burballa Nòria 2018). Later, the environmental justice frame expanded to include broader social justice elements, linked to class, gender and ethnicity, not only with a distributional stance, but also with a view to addressing unequal power relations among social groups. Finally, the inclusion of elements of recognition and participation helped to further expand the reach of this term, and to adapt it to the grounded and contextual circumstances in which struggles for environmental justice are embedded (Burballa Nòria 2018).

Justice and environmental rights can —and should—be addressed from both a distributional and procedural justice perspectives. From a distributional justice standpoint, the uneven distribution of environmental risks and burdens among social groups gives rise to ecological distribution conflicts. Following Temper et al.(2018), an ecological distribution conflict is defined by a collective action (such as a writing of petitions, demonstrations, blockades), induced by existing or anticipated environmental exploitation or damage to nature, that also affects groups of people. Distribution refers to the fact that greater exposure to pollution, unhealthy conditions and environmental injustices in general follow from unequal power relations that relate to gender, social class or belonging to a minority. Distributional injustices thus contributed to the rise of the environmental justice paradigm, which employs discourses about injustice as an effective mobilizing tool for affected social groups. Environmental justice

movements are indeed increasingly investigated as powerful forces that can contribute to promoting a paradigm-shift towards more sustainable economies and societies (Temper et al. 2018). As mentioned earlier, although scholars investigating environmental questions have mostly focused on the importance of distributive justice, the *processes* that construct injustices also deserve academic attention.

Indeed, as anticipated, in addition to distributional justice, environmental justice is also made of two other dimensions: justice as recognition and procedural justice, that are about decision-making and power dynamics between different actors. In the context of environmental governance, justice as recognition happens when the specific identities, cultures, and values of local communities are acknowledged and respected throughout project processes (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020). As for procedural justice or justice as participation, it is realized through opportunities for local communities to take part in project decision-making processes (Wood et al. 2018; Wood et al. 2016). Alongside the intrinsic value of recognition and procedural justice for local communities, the outcomes of decision-making processes that are perceived as fair by all stakeholders are more likely to be acceptable to local communities. Besides, when this occurs, project outcomes are likely to be sustainable after the conclusion of a project (Calisto Friant 2019).

As outlined in former sections, beside local communities, there are generally several actors involved in natural resource management projects, namely the organizations that implement projects on the ground and the donors that finance these projects. In order to be consistent with procedural environmental justice principles, NGOs that carry out environmental projects should ensure that local community members are involved in designing, implementing, and monitoring projects and projects outputs. Local knowledge and resources should therefore be recognized and applied in program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, in order to meet the unique needs of a specific local community.

Not only NGOs, but donors as well are involved in the achievement of environmental justice principles in environmental projects. Indeed, provisions that encourage the participation of local communities in the design, implementation and evaluation phases of projects are to be found in almost

any donors' conditions for funding (Uddin and Belal 2019). However, although donors are generally meticulous in verifying whether projects are executed within anticipated limits of time and costs, and whether deliveries are in line with the scope previously planned, they are less accurate in making sure that the benefits expected by local communities have been achieved, thus making clear that assessing the success of a project is highly subjective (Julian 2016; Lacruz et al. 2019). Also, the interests and priorities of local communities, NGOs and donors do not always overlap (Chahim and Prakash 2014; Choudry 2010). In addition, due to NGOs' resource-dependence from donors, unequal power dynamics are inevitable, and can therefore be a hindrance to environmental justice as recognition and participation. In this research, I thus take into account the hindrances to environmental justice caused by NGOs' resource dependency from donors. It is important to point out that most studies in this field apply environmental justice frameworks to environmental grassroots movements rather than donor-funded environmental projects (Burballa Nòria 2018; Velicu and Kaika 2017; Mahlanza, Ziervogel, and Scott 2016). However, environmental justice has been used as a lens to analyze a wide range of different environmental issues, and in some cases also to investigate the outcomes of conservation mechanisms and interventions (Massarella, Sallu, and Ensor 2020; Mabele 2020; Dawson, Martin, and Danielsen 2018). Indeed, with a view to local communities' participation as framed in the environmental justice paradigm, it is possible to analyze the movements for environmental justice emerging from socio-environmental conflicts and donor-funded environmental projects involving local communities with the same theoretical framework. In the context of movements tackling environmental injustices, affected people suffer decisions imposed on them that are conducive to environmental harms, and react by building opposition. In donor-funded environmental projects, local communities can experience unwanted changes in the use of, or access to natural resources, or having imposed on them a model of development that does not necessarily correspond to their worldview and relationship to the environment they inhabit. In both cases, local communities should be given (and often on paper have) the possibility to design or to co-design the path to be taken in partnership with external supporting actors such as NGOs, that should ensure local communities' meaningful participation.

As already stated, local communities' participation is undoubtedly an important element of good environmental governance (Sowman and Wynberg 2014, 346). However, participation as embedded in the procedural dimension of environmental justice is not easy to achieve, as environmental governance comprises a number of actors with different and sometimes contrasting interests. For this reason, this research attempts to learn more about two of the key actors under consideration: NGOs working on environmental projects and their donors.

Carrying out research on questions such as participation is not an easy task. Borrowing Ledwith (2011, 29) words, "participation, decentralization and empowerment have been co-opted in the mainstream theory and diluted in potential, and key concepts reduced to buzzwords can flip transformative practices into placatory practices". Indeed, although participatory methods should provide local communities with the possibility to play an active and influential role in decisions that affect their lives, they can yield the opposite effect. For example, if participatory practices are not perceived and welcomed as legitimate, they risk reinforcing dynamics that further strengthen the interests of those who are already powerful, both inside the community and in relation to external actors. There is thus the need to reclaim the original meaning of concepts such as participation, for them to regain transformative power.

1.2 The participation of local communities in environmental projects

1.2.1 Defining local communities

To understand the role of donors in facilitating or hindering NGO's work towards local community participation, we first need to define a community. The concept of community is disputed and constantly evolving but the recognition of the differences between a *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is generally well accepted and constitutes the base for western conceptualizations of community. The former is a notion of community based on blood and kinship while the latter defines a group of people that chooses to get together to pursue common interests (Tonnies and Loomis 2002).

As Weber, Marx and Durkheim all convey, albeit with different logics, modernization, urbanization and the rise of capitalism are the main causes of the decline of communities based on personal relationships and solidarity, both in number and quality. The circumstances that permitted the existence of the community as an end in itself gradually declined and were replaced by the need to get together for the sake of efficiency and the pursuit of rational interests. One of the relevant features of these “artificial” communities is the element of human agency in establishing them for the most various reasons, in contrast with the “natural” conception of community based on interdependence and a shared identity that is not built but given by birth (Tonnie and Loomis 2002).

Somehow combining these two apparently contrasting definitions of community, Veghes, Dugulan, and Popescu (2011, 671) present a possible definition of community as “an assembly of individuals, organizations, and institutions located in a certain geographical, historical and/or administrative area, sharing resources (physical, natural, economic, human, social, organizational, and cultural), visions and scopes, joining efforts, and aiming to obtain common performances”. Less pragmatically, and underlining the relational aspect, Brint (2001, 8) defines communities as “aggregates of people who share common activities beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty values and/or personal concern”, and therefore not primarily bonded by rational interests.

Along with the primary *raison d'être of a community*, community agency is also an important issue to tackle, and a contested one. In development studies literature, local communities are often depicted as monolithic and homogeneous entities, and basically as passive recipients of aid; the notion of community is romanticized into a cohesive and homogeneous whole and consequently inequitable distributions of power within a community are ignored, or when specific decision-making processes are imposed on a community, and stakeholders are not empowered to shape agendas according to their own priorities (Kirkby, Williams, and Huq 2018). Leonard (2014) finds that much literature on social and environmental struggles has been naive about the internal conflicts amongst marginalized groups, that prevent them from acting as a homogenous entity contributing towards a transformative development agenda. In the same vein, Allen (2008) criticizes community theories that associate local communities with marginalized and powerless groups, lacking political power and unable to take initiatives.

To contrast these views, Marti, Courpasson, and Dubard Barbosa (2013) define communities as groups that share a common understanding of “what needs to be done”. Indeed, there are numerous examples of communities carrying out initiatives that originate from the bottom-up such as community protocols (Parks, 2020; Bavikatte, Robinson, and Oliva 2015).

In this work, local communities are largely looked at in relation to external actors, namely NGOs and donors, based on the assumption that communities should be given, by these external actors, the possibility to define what is good for them, their own idea of development, and having their own peculiar relationship to the environment recognized (Parks 2020). This latter aspect — recognizing local communities’ relationships to the “natural environment”— is particularly relevant for the scope of this research, especially in the context of conservation projects. In fact, many non-Eurocentric conceptions of human relationships with the environment understand nature as a complex network, to which both the human and non-human world partake. Besides, in non-Euro-centric conceptions of the natural world, humans often understand themselves as steward of the nature, with a view to keeping it healthy for its own sake and for the sake of future generations (Reyes-García et al. 2022; Uggla 2010).

As opposed to Eurocentric worldviews and understandings of community, Chilisa et al. (2016) discuss African and Afrocentric world views and *Ubuntu* philosophy that make up an “African relational paradigm” (317). While being aware that one single paradigm cannot possibly be representative of a whole continent’s worldviews, they detect a common ground constituted by the definition of the self and the relationships to others, both human and non-human, living and nonliving. This paradigm is embedded in the *Ubuntu* philosophy, that emphasizes relationships over the individual, and is generally summarized in the saying “I am because we are, I am a person through other persons, I am we; I am because we are; we are because I am, I am in you, you are in me.”, where the “we” includes both the living and the nonliving (Chilisa et al. 2016, 318).

It is also worthwhile to note that an individual can be part of numerous communities, and also in subgroups inside a community. In their study about citizenship in a rural location in Tanzania, Ngayahambi and Kontinen (2022) found that individuals can participate in a number of communities where they share issues. The most common community identified was the village group, that provides

an arena to officially decide on joint issues and resources through meetings and assemblies; other important types of community are cultural groups, self-help groups, and economic groups, and finally, groups that were created by CSOs to address their agendas. Other types of groups can originate from gender, ethnicity or social status, thus pointing to the existence of power asymmetries inside a community, as explained in the introductory section.

In light of this brief review, for the scope of this work, I refer to local communities as being small scale, with generally strong ties among their members, and not necessarily with a precise delineation of their boundaries as a local community, but with ties that transcend individualistic assumptions. Being local, these groups of people share a geographic area and are bound together by common culture, values, race or social class and similar grievances (Veghes, Dugulan, and Popescu 2011). In addition, these communities have resources to employ, in the form of physical, economic, organizational, cultural and human capital and have specific worldviews that might or might not be recognized and given value by external actors, among which NGOs, funders, governments and international organizations.

To make the point clearer with some examples, some of the local communities taken into consideration for this study are communities of farm dwellers, intended as the people, other than the farm owner or person in charge, who are living on a farm. This definition includes farm workers living on farms (who may or may not be working on the farm where they live); farm workers' spouses, partners or family members; occupiers and long-term occupiers; labor tenants and their associates, with many still facing extreme tenure insecurity and lacking access to adequate housing and basic services. This is due to the absence of an administrative framework that secures the tenure of labor tenants, farm workers and occupiers, and that can provide them with access to a range of essential services, such as access to adequate housing, water, electricity and sanitation services³. The supporting NGO under analysis, the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), works with communities of farm dwellers in KwaZulu

³ <https://afra.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AFRA-Improving-Farm.pdf> last access 2/6/22

Natal (KZN), and aims at facilitating and building consensus between farm owners, farm dwellers and the state on how to realize the rights of farm dwellers.

Another type of local community taken into consideration in my study are the smallholder farmers of the *Suid Bokkeveld*, communities of small-scale and subsistence livestock and rooibos⁴ farmers that are heavily depended on their natural environment for their survival and livelihoods. The supporting NGO, Indigo development and change (Indigo), helps them build local capacity of previously in sustainable cultivation practices, in the context of the climate crisis bringing frequent droughts in the region.

Community-driven projects such as those under analysis embody an approach that aims at giving control over planning decisions and investment resources to community groups, who should hold power in the pursuit of social, economic and cultural priorities. This objective requires a long-term, integrated, and systemic approach to address economic, environmental, and social issues, both from a micro (focusing on the features of the different groups that compose a community) and macro (regarding the community as a holistic system) perspective (Chan and Huang 2004). In this vein, I now define the concept of participation, in relation to environmental justice.

1.2.2 What is participation for?

When participation is framed as a means to achieve better environmental outcomes or gain legitimacy to deal with a given issue, the utility of participatory approaches can be conceived in many ways. Ernst (2019) underlines the importance of participatory environmental governance for improving decision making and for social learning, intended as the collective process of acquiring knowledge and disseminating it, while Newig et al. (2019) focus on the learning processes of communities through participatory environmental governance based on the assumption that it is a condition to achieve beneficial environmental outcomes. Very explicitly, the EU Water Framework Directive openly

⁴ Rooibos is a plant usually grown in the Cederberg, a small mountainous area in the region of the Western Cape province of South Africa, whose leaves are used for to make a herbal tea

acknowledges that “public participation is not an end in itself but a tool to achieve the objectives of the water framework directive” (2003: 6). In a different vein, Razzaque and Kleingeld (2014) bring the example of the South African Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), a sustainable water resource governance process that involves several actors, among which local communities. Local community participation is here intended not only as instrumental for a good water governance, but also to maximize the benefits for the poor and the everyone’s quality of life, emphasizing that when these processes are rushed for the sake of economic development, or when they fail to account for community knowledge, they are ultimately damaging for all stakeholder involved.

Sconfienza (2017) frames community participation in very pragmatic terms, as conducive to more efficient and fairer policies, if only for the fact of taking into consideration the inputs of a wide range of stakeholders that bear various and different interests. However, civic environmentalism does not just hint at the effectiveness of decisions made through participatory practices, but also points to the fairness and inclusiveness of the decision-making processes. Effectiveness and inclusiveness can, in many cases, go hand in hand. However, when participatory practices are situated in an environmental governance project setting, priority is often given to achieving the desired environmental outcomes. Conversely, when affected people spontaneously come together to tackle environmental issues and seek support from external actors, participation can acquire a different meaning and a different weight. Indeed, Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) make a substantial distinction between two different understandings of participation, specifically participation by consultation and collaboration and empowerment participation. Participation by consultation implies that actors external to the community, such as NGOs, ask affected people’s opinion on a given issue with no obligation to include these inputs in the decisions concerning a project. In this way, all the decision-making power rests in the hands of external actors. Conversely, *empowerment* participation occurs when primary stakeholders, in this case local communities, are capable and willing to initiate processes and to inclusively take decisions about what should be achieved and how. Local communities can thus gain agency for dictating the agenda, have a significant say in decision-making, and consequently, ownership and control rests in their hands, with external actors such as NGOs operating as facilitators. In this understanding, participation is about

people mobilizing to bring about environmental, social, and political change, and are empowered to defying unjust hierarchies of power, knowledge and economic distribution.

1.2.3 Empowerment as a result of participation

The concept of empowerment is closely linked to participation and can be interpreted as a desirable result of participation. Starting from the 1980es empowerment was framed as a key object in international development programs. It was originally understood as a process of conscientization and grassroots political mobilization aimed at a radical transformation of inequitable political structures. Its nature changed substantially once it was appropriated by international development agencies, so much that it turned into a buzzword used to legitimize top-down and market-driven development policies. The supposedly emancipatory concept of empowerment was reduced to individual fulfillment and economic development, following “economic reductionist logics” (Miraftab 2004). This trend was so pervading that feminist authors (Sardenberg 2008, Calvès 2009) theorized two different conceptualizations of empowerment: liberating empowerment and liberal empowerment. Liberal empowerment is an idea of empowerment as a means to an end, generally a neoliberal kind of development. It has an individualistic focus, based on individual growth and development, the fulfillment of individual interests, a focus on technical and instrumental aspects, and top-down, paternalistic transmission of know-how and notions, to be accepted and internalized passively by the recipients. Liberal empowerment puts a strong emphasis on participation, but assumed in the narrow sense of participation as a means (Parfitt 2004), and reduced to informing and consulting the beneficiaries with the aim of improving service delivery. In this sense, citizen participation is to be conducted in existing bodies of local government or other institutionalized decision-making structures, rather than on independent community action.

If participation by consultation can be linked to the notion of liberal empowerment, empowerment participation correlates the notion of liberating empowerment. Liberating empowerment takes power relations as a central issue; it was theorized by the feminist scholar Sardenberg (2008), who

looked at women empowerment as an issue of self-determination but also as a necessary requisite to tear down patriarchy and achieve gender equality. Empowerment is thus both instrumental for social change and an end in itself. Liberating empowerment addresses the questions of why some groups are marginalized or excluded or have no access to information, implies the conscientization of a state of disempowerment and entails that individuals understand the political dimension of their problems in order to solve them. In this understanding of empowerment, participation is a right and a process of critically questioning and challenging unequal power relations (Wijnendaele 2014). For the purposes of this work, I will refer to the liberating conception of empowerment, and consider it as an outcome of participation. Indeed, participation can be considered as empowering, since by handing over decision-making power to local communities, and respecting their priorities, they gain the power to hold external powerful actors to account (Van Zyl and Claeyé 2019).

However, participatory approaches sometimes only pay lip-service to the aim of promoting bottom-up and inclusive management of natural resources. This can happen for example when the notion of community is romanticized into a cohesive and homogeneous whole and consequently inequitable distributions of power within a community are ignored, or when specific decision-making processes are imposed on a community, and stakeholders are not empowered to shape agendas according to their own priorities (Kirkby, Williams, and Huq 2018). For example, Leonard (2014) finds that much literature on social and environmental struggles has been naive about the internal conflicts amongst marginalized groups, that prevent them from acting as a homogeneous entity contributing towards a transformative development agenda. Indeed, in order to achieve effective, but also sustainable and community-driven environmental governance, it is local communities who should identify the best ways to address environmental issues, consistently with their own cultural and societal values and worldviews. Therefore, it is key to recognize the specific identities, cultures, and values of local communities throughout project processes (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020), with a view to addressing unequal power relations among social groups (Burballa Nòria 2018). NGOs involved in local environmental projects can play a crucial role in promoting spaces of participation, and by doing so can contribute to building communities (Markham and Fonjong 2016). The strategies that NGOs adopt for

promoting and facilitating the participation of the different voices that compose a group in the self-definition and the pursuit of its goals comprise both internal organizational arrangements and external constraints, determined by the political context in which they operate, among which resource-dependency dynamics stand out as particularly relevant. In this vein, I now discuss the role of NGOs in contributing to local community participation with a view to environmental justice, and the obstacles they face.

1.3 Civil society and NGOs as contributors to community participation

1.3.1 An Excursus on Civil Society

Civil society has not been a dominant research interest since the 2000s. Some scholars claim that the idea of civil society has been a victim of its own success; others contend that its political importance has been largely overestimated. Others still argue that civil society is simply changing form and engaging differently, and thus theory-building on civil society and the interpretation of its current and future paths of evolution is increasingly challenging (Edwards 2009). Three primary conceptualizations of civil society follow a chronological line: in the ancient world civil society and the organized political power were indissolubly linked, even identified as the same thing. Rousseau and Kant shared this vision and intended civil society as the result of a social contract between the citizens and the governor, until the rise of market economy and the great Revolutions in France and America provoked a paradigm shift that brought people together to contrast the interference of the state (Edwards, 2014). The second flourishing of civil society studies happened in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was assimilated with movements opposing dictatorships and totalitarianism. The awareness that change could come from below provoked a change in the relationships between state and society in this historical moment. The salience of the separation and autonomy of civil society from the state went hand in hand with the acquisition of a *global* meaning to (Kaldor 2003). The study of global civil society is about how it has transcended national boundaries but given the variety and the fluid character of its manifestations and the heterogeneity of groups and realities that constitute it, it is not definable as a

unitary object of study. Global civil society has developed hand in hand with globalization, which has reshaped society's problems and functioning, and consequently, civil society's ability to address them.

During the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, two very different understandings of civil society were dominant. The first one, the "activist version" (Kaldor, 2003b, 588) was adopted to describe the so-called new social movements, who emphasized their isolation from institutions as "organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation" (McAdam 1982, 25). The term civil society thus interpreted well their autonomy from state and market and their generally confrontational stance towards them. Very differently, the second post-Cold-War understanding linked civil society to the neoliberal agenda: the positive contribution of civil society to enhance democracy was promoted by global institutions with a view to implementing market reforms. In fact, the recognition of civil society as a third sector alongside the market and state does not necessarily imply a conflictual dynamic; Fukuyama (2001), considers an active and well-organized civil society as the guardian of democracy and considers corruption and bad governance as the results of low levels of social capital. The role of civil society as guardian of democracy thus gains a strong political connotation; associations can perform the role of counterweighting the power of corporate and government, sometimes being the only channel for people to make their voices heard and to provide some forms of control on institutions, especially in countries where an authoritarian government is in place.

The main difference between these two understandings of civil society thus rests on the question of *who* creates the space in which civil society organizations form and develop, and the fact that those who create these spaces are likely to have power within it. In many societies and governments, demands for participation in decision-making fora have created opportunities for civil society to be involved and consulted, through *invitation* by the authorities. Movements that decide to *accept the invitation* and to take advantage of the opening of formal channels are, in Kaldor's view (2003), "tamed", because they gave up their conflictual dimension. Similarly, Tarrow (1994) understands this institutionalization as the consequence of a strategic choice of social movements that move from an oppositional protest

posture to a more bureaucratic and institutional position, which allows them to negotiate with or become part of the political establishment. It follows that NGOs are the result of the institutionalization and co-optation into global governance of SMOs.

On the other hand, there are examples in any society of spaces for participation that excluded groups create for themselves. These spaces emerge “out of sets of common concerns or identifications” and “may come into being as a result of popular mobilization, such as around identity or issue-based concerns, or may consist of spaces in which like-minded people join together in common pursuits” (Cornwall 2002, 24). These *claimed* spaces correspond to the definition of social movements, which aim at bringing about social and political change from the bottom-up. Following Tarrow (1998, 4), a social movement is characterized by "collective challenges [to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes] by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities”.

Civil Society, NGOs and social movements organizations (SMOs) were sometimes used as synonyms, especially in empirical studies after the end of the Cold War: in political sociology the macro category of SMOs was opposed to the category of parties and interest groups; in the field of international relations NGOs were addressed as opposed to nation states, and in social theory civil society was opposed to state and market, but, in every case, had the common denominator of promoting democratization from below. The same cannot be said about theory, where little dialogue exists between social movements and civil society studies (Della Porta, 2018, 138-139). Indeed, Kontinen and Millstein (2017) point to the need of rethinking civil society theory: as limited dialogue exists between these threads of theory, there is the tendency to see NGOs and SMOs as separate entities instead of exploring their interconnectedness.

However, for the scope of this study, I focus on NGOs rather than SMOs, specifically on local (national) NGOs. I made this choice because local NGOs are the organizations in the development world that both deal with the work on the ground and in connection to global goals and external constraints, so they often find themselves in a position where they have to choose whether to give priority to upward accountability (to donors) or downward accountability (to the communities they

work with). Moreover, compared to SMOs and grassroots organizations, thanks to their formal character, NGOs have the possibility to access both tangible and intangible resources among which financial, technical, political, cultural (Chowdhury, Kourula, and Siltaoja 2021). In this vein, I now turn to a discussion of NGOs as important actors in shaping local communities' participation.

1.3.2 Defining NGOs

The term Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) was first adopted in the Article 71 of the UN charter. The acronym NGO emphasizes its separation and autonomy from governmental bodies, and it is the most widely used term to describe nonprofits working in every field. However, in many contexts the term NGO recalls international NGOs (INGOs), thus excluding not only community-based and grassroots organizations, but also local NGOs, that operate within a country at local level.

Following the framework adopted by the United Nations, the criteria for defining NGOs are having some form of organization (goals and activities are defined and structured, and are carried out regularly), and having a private character, outside the structures of the government⁵. Being private organizations, NGOs have a self-governing nature and internal procedures for the management of internal affairs. As non-profit entities, NGOs reinvest their surpluses consistently with the mission of the organization (Casey 2016).

Taking these characteristics as basic to NGOs, there are many ways to approach their classification, depending on the starting point or the selected focus of the investigation. NGOs have an institutional character and are generally professional. As already said, Mary Kaldor (2003) defines NGOs as the result of the institutionalization and the co-optation in global governance of the “new social movements” of the 1960s. Back to the global dimension, due to the widespread presence in the global South of organizations from the global North, which are hierarchically based and mainly service-

⁵ Despite some margins of ambiguity, when organizations that are supposed to be private or self-governing are founded under government initiative or work under strict government guidelines (for a discussion see Casey 2016, 25)

provision oriented, Kaldor (2003) identifies four major differences among NGOs, that affect their overall composition. The first relates to the geographical location of the organizations, i.e., being based in the global North or in the global South. Northern-based NGOs generally have larger budgets, more developed international media connections, and more formal internal bureaucracies than their South-based counterparts (Murdie and Davis 2012). Northern-based organizations are generally closer (both literally and figuratively) to policymakers and big funders, while South-based NGOs are generally closer to the people they work with, from both a geographical and a socio-cultural perspective and often have connections to local populations and a deep knowledge of local conditions.

Though there are generally divisions in capacity and focus between Northern and Southern NGOs, these groups are in no ways homogeneous themselves. Northern-based organizations are not all the same, as their action might reflect the underlying policies of the specific country of origin. Some international NGOs (INGOs) maintain their headquarters and support base in developed countries but also have local branches with local leaders and local personnel, invested with decision making authority. Other large northern-based NGOs, like ActionAid and Oxfam International have moved their permanent seat to South Africa and Nigeria respectively. NGOs can also operate through a combination of “northern” and local leadership and work force. Likewise, “outsider” northern-based NGOs often cooperate with local partners in the field, be they local governmental institutions, community-based organizations, or other NGOs. The obstacle of being external and alien to local dynamics can be overcome, or at least mitigated, by selecting local partners that are perceived as legitimate.

The second differentiation suggested by Kaldor regards *advocacy* or *service-provision* as principal missions. The service provision category encompasses the wide range of the material needs of the constituencies, while the advocacy category covers mobilizations around specific issues as well as lobbying. Their predominant mission is thus getting a targeted actor to adopt a policy or behavior in line with the position of the NGO. Many NGOs could be classified as hybrids, as they perform both advocacy and service provisions (Murdie and Davis 2012). Thirdly, *solidarity* NGOs are juxtaposed to *mutual-benefit* NGOs. The former are dependent on outside funding and members are typically middle-class, committed individuals that care for – but cannot claim to represent– their constituencies. On the

other hand, mutual benefit organizations are established for and by the members of a group and aim to secure goods for that group, so, their goals are at least to some extent, particularistic. On the other hand, while not representatives of the beneficiaries, solidarity NGOs generally aim to secure common goods. Choudry and Kapoor (2013) argue that their action is often laden with eurocentric or even neocolonial worldviews. However, if NGOs' actions and strategies align with the priorities of the beneficiaries, solidaristic NGOs can supersede these assumptions.

Indeed, the reality on the ground is nuanced and does not respond to strict categorizations. In this study I largely adopt the term NGO while specifying relevant characteristics when necessary. I take into consideration Southern (local) NGOs of various sizes that can be both local branches of international NGO (such as WWF South Africa) or local organizations born out of the concerns of a specific group of people. The organizations under analysis are also a mix of service provision and solidarity NGOs, who both provide services to local communities (mostly training and capacity-building) and carry out advocacy activities around various types of issues. Finally, the NGOs under analysis are mostly solidarity NGOs whose actions and strategies align with the priorities of the beneficiaries.

Numerous local NGOs in the Global South working with local communities apply participatory processes to their work. The importance of NGOs is well recognized in the field of environmental governance, and NGOs are potential bridge-builders between global aspirations and local action, as they are often involved in implementing global efforts on the ground and in funding arrangements between donors and local communities. In these endeavors, NGOs can play a crucial role in promoting spaces of participation, and by doing so can contribute to building communities (Markham and Fonjong 2016). Moreover, support from non-state actors, and from NGOs in particular, can play a key role in achieving a community's goals, because of the skill-transfer, lobbying, visibility and funds that an external organization can provide. However, the relationships between local communities and NGOs can be challenging and power-laden, and NGOs can shape community decision-making processes in both intentional and non-intentional ways (Markham and Fonjong 2016; Kilby 2006; Mercer 2002).

Indeed, these sections have so far depicted NGOs as local communities' "natural allies", however, there is a trend identified by scholars such as Choudry and Kapoor (2013); Chahim and Prakash (2014); Shrestha and Adhikari (2011); Roy (2015), that produces a shift of NGOs from horizontal and broad-based organizations to more vertical and professionalized ones. The result is that NGOs begin to focus on specific results and funds, rather than on their shared values with local communities, becoming more technocratic in their attitudes. This process, referred to as NGOization, has a number of major implications for the work of NGOs in relation to local community participation.

1.4 Elements shaping relationships between NGOs and local communities

It is clear by now that if NGOs intend to promote and facilitate the participation of local communities involved in environmental projects, they are faced with opportunities and challenges derived by both organizational choices and external constraints. I now discuss research about the factors that shape the relationships between NGOs and local communities. The most relevant found in the literature are first, the proximity or distance —both geographical and ideological— of NGOs to local communities, secondly, the socio/cultural political context in which NGOs operate and the relational dynamics of NGOs with other actors, especially other NGOs; thirdly, constraints that are externally imposed, in particular related to funding.

1.4.1 Proximity and distance

Taking into consideration environmental projects in the global South, the proximity of the NGOs to the beneficiaries, both geographical and ideological, seems to be key to ensure that NGOs professionals have a deep knowledge of the context and of its cultural and social specificities, a process that can be very demanding and time-consuming. Based on Kaldor (2003), Northern-based NGOs, as outlined in chapter 1, are outsiders with respect to their constituencies; they are assumed to assist the global South, but their members cannot claim to represent the people they are committed to help. Being

Northern based, they are closer to policymakers and thus to the sources of funds, to which they might have easier access, and at the same time are generally less rooted in the local environment. Conversely, organizations based in the global South are, at least on paper, more responsive to community needs if only for the fact of being closer to the local communities they are working with, and for experiencing, if partly, the same everyday hardships.

In their extensive study on the factors that influence the ability of NGO is meeting long-term transformative goals in development and social justice, Banks, Hulme, and Edwards (2015) claim that NGOs that have linkages with the grassroots and are physically and ideologically close to their beneficiaries are more likely to ensure that their projects respond to local needs and realities. This view is corroborated by various studies, in various fields where NGOs operate. Parks (2020) brings the example of the Kukula Traditional Health Practitioners Association in South Africa, that among other things, fought for accessing protected areas to harvest medicinal plants, as access to plants was also affected by the complex legal framework applying to protected areas. The association enjoyed support from a range of locally based organizations, whose geographical proximity and presence in the local communities, together with the length of their relationships, seems to have had a beneficial effect on the progress made in securing communities' aims.

Similarly, Andrews (2014), brings the examples of NGOs working with local communities belonging to the Zapatista movement in Mexico. As the movement grew stronger, some communities demanded the supporting NGOs to shift the priorities of the projects in which they participated, for example from women empowerment to economic development. As difficult as it must have been for the involved NGOs, local communities made a clear claim about their specific needs and priorities in that moment. Some of the NGOs under analysis were able to meet the community needs, and were those that had an ideological proximity with the movement, a physical proximity (staff that worked day to day with the communities) and that also could rely on funding sources that were not attached to binding and specific conditions.

In the same vein, Kilby (2006) brings examples of empowerment projects in India, where being seen as an insider was an integral part of gaining legitimacy with the communities. This means that the

NGO held monthly meetings with community representatives, that allowed the possible tensions between community members and the NGO to be managed, as decisions were made as equals, and the NGO was perceived as an insider.

Tukahirwa, Mol, and Oosterveer (2011) bring the opposite example. They studied communities and NGOs involved in improving the sanitation and solid waste in informal settlements in Uganda and found that communities might see the NGO as inaccessible if it is located beyond their socially defined neighborhood boundary, and that both social and spatial proximity are important in explaining the success of initiatives.

Close relationship between NGOs and their beneficiaries thus seems to be the most important factor to ensure NGOs' legitimacy in the eyes of local communities. Yet, closeness and proximity also seem to be what NGOs "set aside in favor of operational efficiency and policy influence and in response to donor requirements" (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015, 710).

1.4.2 Cooperation and competition

The capacity of NGOs to meaningfully involve local communities greatly depends also on their capacities to cooperate and create networks with state agencies, funders and other NGOs. Hoogesteger (2016) brings the example of Ecuador, where developmental and environmental NGOs have come to play a key role in the consolidation of water users' organizations, and where the key to this development was the creation of a broad network that includes development NGOs, grassroots organizations, academics and state representatives.

Indeed, the rationale for civil society organizations' collaboration is rather straightforward: when NGOs work together, they can draw more attention to an issue or a specific local struggle, increasing, among other things, the total amount of donations (O'Brien and Evans 2017). Moreover, NGOs and community organizations can exercise more influence and broaden the range of their action if they are part of networks and alliances. For advocacy organizations, this basic dynamic is well

established: NGOs work together to improve the likelihood of achieving political or social change; it follows that NGOs with similar targets are likely to collaborate.

Although collaboration generally improves their overall impact, not all NGOs have the same desire or capacity to join together. For example, NGOs based in different geographical locations are subject to different political pressures and might also have different capacities, thus leading to differences in their behavior towards networking and collaboration in general. Murdie and Davis (2012) claim that, as southern NGOs often lack funds and international connections, they have less chances to network with each other than their northern counterparts. Also, sometimes strategies to divide and rule the nonprofit sector are even promoted by governmental actors in order to *tame* the NGO sector into a tool of the state (Herrold and Atia 2016).

However, one of the main determinants for NGOs not to collaborate is the market of aid donations, that can undermine the desires of NGOs to coordinate for achieving political or social change goals, with harmful effects because of inter-NGO competition. In their study of environmental NGOs' in Cameroon, and how their strategies are affected by their funding, management strategies, and relationships with government, communities, and other NGOs, Markham and Fonjong (2016) find that the cooperation of International Environmental NGOs with their local counterparts is not listed as a high priority goal by the organizations that they investigated, although the strengthening of local civil society and of the environmental sector as a whole would lead to both environmental and participatory benefits.

Besides the reluctance or impossibility to cooperation, NGOs also face competition from similar organizations. Cooley and Ron (2002) find that the growing number of NGOs within a given transnational sector increases uncertainty, competition and insecurity for all organizations in that sector, and Koch (2011) finds that NGOs are more likely to compete when they work in the same geographical area.

Also, NGOs compete with each other for donor funding by submitting project proposals, which are then reviewed according to specific criteria. Besides evaluating NGOs' professional experience in

a given field and their ability to fill out the application in English or the language of the donor organization, donors evaluate NGOs based on their cost-effectiveness, and generally look for the lowest proposed budget and the highest possible outputs. This rationale for disbursing funding automatically excludes those NGOs that are located in remote regions of the country and do not have employees who are proficient in English, as well as newer and smaller organizations which do not have other ongoing projects, and that cannot create synergies with other ongoing projects to contain budgets (Kluczewska 2019).

1.4.3 Resource-dependency dynamics

“[Our NGO] only implements projects that donors are interested in funding” (NGO professional cited in Khieng and Dahles 2015, 1414). This declaration condenses well the problems that NGOs must face when dealing with funding arrangements. The literature about the issues faced by NGOs because of resource-dependency dynamics is large and mostly unanimous, and some of these problems have a direct effect on NGOs-local community relations.

According to AbouAssi (2013), donor-NGO relationships are based on a “supply-led” approach, where resources are channeled into programs with goals that are pre-set by donors, thus creating a one-way relationship where donors set program objectives and NGOs implement projects to achieve these objectives, and monitor progress towards them with reports and evaluations.

By responding to donors’ preferences, NGOs can drift away from their social mission. For example, Hanafi and Tabar (2003) write about Palestinian NGOs engaged in social service projects, who had to shift the focus of their mission when funders decided to re-organize their funding priorities towards democracy in preparation for political elections. Similarly, Rahman (2006) writes about instances of reallocations of funds from political mobilization to service-delivery in Bangladesh.

Vukov (2013) documents the experiences of Serbian NGOs, that lament the project-based nature of funding, where operating costs are not covered and where managerial logics and “naïve” approaches based on defined activities hamper the ability of NGOs to bring about actual change, and

where the projects awarded are those that make big, unrealistic promises to be delivered in a short period of time. In this vein, only short-term projects get funded, and NGOs have to adapt to the logic of the market or finding other funding sources.

In addition to that, there is also a legitimacy question to be tackled. Following Suarez and Gugerty (2016), what confers legitimacy to NGOs is the eyes of donors is professionalization, as conceptualized in the section on NGOization. Another element that confers legitimacy to NGOs is local embeddedness, meaning NGOs' closeness to beneficiaries, as explained above. However, they find that generally donors prioritize professionalization over local embeddedness.

In light of this and taking into analysis NGOs that depend on donor funds, donors hold power over NGOs, as they are the ones that set the rules of the game. NGOs must respond appropriately to donors' wishes in order to secure the stream of funds. In turn, the relationship between NGOs and communities can become one of power held by the NGO with the community often forced to respond appropriately to the NGO's real or perceived wishes (Power, Maury, and Maury 2002). This makes donors' condition an important determinant of NGO's accountability to the communities they work with.

All these elements found by the literature resonate with the NGOization argument, as it examines the ways in which "funding and other material support can orient organizations to prioritize institutional survival and maintenance at the expense of mobilization", and how "NGO's actions may be shaped by material incentives" at the expenses of movements and communities (Choudry and Kapoor 2013, 5), and, in this case, of community participation in environmental projects.

In this vein, I now turn to a discussion on donor organizations as a major force that shape the relationships between NGOs and local communities, by looking at critical literature on donors' requirements for accountability, their supposed support for participatory approaches and the problems that they pose to NGOs in terms of preference for short-term results.

As outlined in chapter 1, with donor organizations I refer to organizations that distribute grants to other organizations or individuals, to carry in out initiatives that are in line with the donor's priorities and that help the donor achieve its own strategic goals.

If partnerships and collaborations between NGOs can be problematic, partnerships between NGOs and donors are even more so. The actual question to ask is whether partnerships between donors and NGOs can actually exist, and if they do, how they can be defined. Development literature does not provide a definite answer, but points to the unlikelihood of the existence of true partnerships between development actors whose relationships are characterized by power asymmetries.

Pickard suggests that the term partnership denotes a relationship between equal participants “who enjoy a distinctive bond of trust, a shared analysis of existing conditions in society, and thus in general a common orientation of what needs to be done to construct a more just, equitable, and democratic world” (2007, 135). Starting from donors, Schöneberg (2017) points to partnership as an ideological statement that would demonstrate the strength of donors' commitment to solidarity and a as a set of new collaborative mechanisms and funding practice.

In any case, the concept of partnership is always based on the assumption of an equal standing among participants, even though they might carry differentiated responsibilities (Pickard 2007). Although many donor organizations genuinely strive to build meaningful relationships on equal terms, they cannot avoid the question of power (Schöneberg 2017). In the same vein, O'Brien and Evans (2017) state that while partnerships between donors and NGOs are judged as desirable and beneficial, the complex power dynamics that characterize their relationships require further attention. Lister (2000) illustrates a discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality of donor-NGO partnerships, based on the fact that NGOs-donors' shared understanding of common issues or social problems does not mean that the relationship between them is an equal one.

The debate on partnerships, and especially on what conditions make partnerships possible, is very much alive. As I explain in the next sections, the conditions that make donor-NGO relationships unequal are multiple, but mostly based on NGOs resource-dependency from donors. In practice, these

power imbalances materialize in the fact that “only [donor] agencies have final judgement in the matter of grants, while recipients can do little more than wait for the decision on their funding requests” (Pickard 2007, 576). Although this view depicts NGOs as powerless and passive actors (while this is often not the case), donors detain all the power to grant or withhold funding, and, if we take equality as an indispensable element for a relation of partnership this alone is a condition that makes a partnership between them impossible. The power to grant or withhold funding is unequally shared, and so [...] a true partnership can never be said to exist, since an unequal power relationship inevitably prevails, at least on the question of funding (Pickard 2007 137).

However, Following Pickard (2007) during a period, starting from the 1960 — as the global South gained greater political independence— and carrying roughly into the 1970es and 1980s, the attention of the donor community shifted from addressing poverty to addressing the root causes of marginalization. In this vein, local CSOs subjects had to be strong and independent, and funding had to be given without attached conditions, and be based on mutual commitments. Forming a partnership thus required a shared and a jointly constructed vision, and these mutually agreed commitment had to be applied in the long term (Pickard 2007). Some donor agencies undertook the task and created “something akin to a partnership [...] among the Northern and Southern institutions working to eliminate the root causes, or structural reasons, behind the lack of opportunity that characterized the lives of most of the world's population” (577). Looking specifically at South Africa, during apartheid, many civil society efforts were funded by foreign donors, with funds channeled to civil society groups in the struggle against apartheid. This aid was political, as the goal of this funding was, for the most part, to support and accelerate the collapse of apartheid. In this context, donors did not adhere to the same strict funding policies that were required of groups in countries with different political environments. Indeed, because of the apartheid government's strict controls, donors and civil society groups tried to avoid financial scrutiny by being deliberately non-transparent in their funding practices, and consequently, there was no real donor oversight on how funds were spent (Hearn 2000).

It is starting from the late 1980es-1990es that the neoliberal economic policy, and a shift of fundraising strategies among Northern agencies brought about the problems outlined in the NGOization

argument, and donor organizations began to raise funds mostly from governments. This implied enhanced accountability to government back-funders, embodied in the need for demonstrating success, while funds were very often conditioned on recipients CSOs engaging in particular issues, thus creating epistemological barriers that further hinder partnerships between donors and NGOs (Pickard 2007). In this vein, starting from the assumption that power dynamics between donors and NGOs spill over to shaping NGOs-local communities' relationships, I continue my discussion on how donors can shape NGOs action through resource dependency dynamics. Following (Rauh 2010, 30), especially northern donors tend to reward organizations that produce "good documentation" and use specific management tools which have been criticized for being "rigid, hard to use, culturally inappropriate, and overly time-consuming for civil society". In the same vein, Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman (2006) claim that plans, timetables, required inputs, expected outcomes and quantitative indicators might not be the best tools measure real change in the communities, and call for more flexibility on the part of donors to allow NGOs and communities to co-create objectives as well as monitoring and evaluation tools. However, demonstrating results is often the only way for regularly receiving flows of funds, and NGOs may need to give priority to donor accountability and to achieve short-term results rather than invest money, time and energy in long term, relation-intensive projects (Benson 2012).

Donors' control over projects can also cause other adverse effects, such as "the invalidation of participatory approaches, reduced cultural sensitivity, weakened ties with the grassroots, and a dilution of core values" (Elbers and Arts 2011, 714), as NGOs spend most of their time and resources measuring tangible products such as the numbers of schools built, trees planted, and land area irrigated, as, for the most part, donor appraisals tend to focus on products (Ebrahim 2003). With these premises, NGOs may also advertise the key role of communities in designing, carrying out and monitoring their activities, while this does not correspond to the reality on the ground, also because of the short spans of time often allowed to NGOs by funders for designing, implementing and monitoring a project (Benson 2012).

The time spent in designing and implementing activities appears indeed to be crucial. Delfin and Tang (2007) examined the impact of foundation funding on environmental NGOs and found that one-year grants are more likely to be associated with donor's co-optation of NGO leadership and

mission, while multi-year grants are significantly more likely to contribute to capacity building. Long-term support from external actors to communities engaged in environmental governance schemes can thus be conducive to securing the self-defined needs of the communities.

Despite all the criticism surrounding donors' practices, Giffen and Judge (2010) claim that there is a growing awareness among donors that the nature of civil society's work is not always amenable to the tangible, measurable indicators required by a results-driven agenda.

Uddin and Belal (2019) show that provisions for participation of local communities in the design, implementation and evaluation phases are well-present in donors' conditions for funding. However, Lacruz et al. (2019) claim that although donors are generally meticulous in verifying whether projects were executed within expected limits of time and costs, and whether deliveries are in line with the scope previously planned, they do not pay the same attention to the benefits expected by the beneficiaries, thus making clear that assessing the success of a project is very subjective. Even though on paper donors seem to have moved towards allowing civil society to have a greater agenda-setting role in relation to their policy and practices, in general donors' policy seems to be limited to the need for consultation of civil society in their programs at country level. Following Rauh (2010), donors do not generally take the approach of strengthening civil society for its own sake; their engagement with civil society organizations always seems to be subsumed to overarching organizational strategies and goals. So, good intentions notwithstanding, donors have their own agenda to which NGOs should adapt. As a consequence, NGOs can find themselves ignoring relevant local political issues or not giving practical or local traditional knowledge the importance it might deserve, or that they might want to assign them, because of their compliance with donors' agendas. These mechanisms can also stifle innovation, because through performance assessments, donors often base their funding strategies on "successful" projects, by rewarding NGOs that stick to proven approaches, while penalizing those who attempt to develop more bottom-up approaches (Ebrahim 2003). Moreover, most donor organizations adopt a narrow definition of civil society, that identifies it with professional NGOs who can master the donors' terminology and ways of working, and who can satisfy strict accountability processes (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015).

In light of all this, the process of strengthening local civil society may be best supported when donors “do less” and allow local communities and NGOs themselves to determine their own agendas and to build projects that suit their own needs and the specific context in which local communities are embedded (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Edwards 2011).

However, not all donors are the same, and different typologies of donors have different interests, resources and ways of working. For NGOs that aim at promoting local communities’ participation as part of their strategy, there are advantages and disadvantage in partnering up with any type of donors.

1.5 How I look at donor – NGO relationships

In this sector, I discuss the NGOization argument as my theoretical framework to look at donors’ power over NGOs. By breaking it down into its main processes: professionalization, projectization and bureaucratization, it allows me to identify epistemological injustices and neocolonial practices embedded in donors’ rules and conditions, to understand how these hamper NGOs’ efforts towards environmental justice.

1.5.1 The NGOization argument

The process of NGOization can be read “the global neo-liberalism’s active promotion and official sanctioning of particular organizational forms and practices among [various] sectors of civil society” (Alvarez 2009, 176).

More in detail, NGOization can be described as the depoliticization, projectization, professionalization and institutionalization dynamics faced by CSOs (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). With professionalization, NGOization scholars describe a process by which organizations looking for funding have to demonstrate managerial and technical capacities to administer projects and to narratively and financially account for the funds they receive. The experts required are often professional figures that have received academic training in management, rather than activists that are trained and hired by NGOs

to do the job. In addition, the phenomenon of professionalization conveys the idea that social change is a specialized profession. In their work on institutional isomorphism in South African NGOs, Claeys and Jackson (2012) found that donors see NGOs' professional formal management education as a proxy for an NGO's good management, thus making business principles and capacities a norm to which NGOs have to comply to be perceived as legitimate actors. Indeed, professionalization, in general, valorizes certain kinds of knowledge, specifically managerial capacities, that are also usually drawn from western assumptions, while dismissing others that are built on the ground and through social struggles (Choudry and Kapoor 2013, 15). In this vein, in the South African context, Sinwell (2013) suggests that the NGOization of movements arises not only through practices imposed on NGOs, but also through expectations that social change must occur in the institutional spaces. NGOization therefore occurs when external agents intervene in local struggles undertaken by the working class or poor and have the effect of making them less militant.

Another feature of the NGOization process is the tendency of organizations that finance and carry out projects to break up complex situations into issues and projects, that are easier to manage and account for. In this way a projectization of social change is underway, that shows an unwillingness or incapacity to tackle complex issues in their whole. For community participation, this is harmful because environmental issues are systemic in their causes and not reducible to outputs and results to be delivered in a given timespan. Indeed, reducing complex issues to time-bound, siloed projects does not make sure that their results are going to be sustainable after the NGO leaves. In this vein, Bayrak, Tu, and Burgers (2013) indicate that project-based funding can even distort the very aims and goals of local communities.

A third aspect of NGOization to take into account is that, in order to obtain and secure funds, NGOs must dedicate a considerable amount of time and energy to fulfill the bureaucratic tasks they are called to perform, for example to monitor and evaluate projects following formal rules and sometimes even using tools and criteria that are drawn from the business world, thus diverting time and resources that could and should be employed to carry out their work on the ground and to build or strengthen oppositional movements. NGOs thus risk to get trapped in bureaucracy and grant-writing nets and to be

co-opted by donors. In fact, in order to pursue their ambitions, NGOs dedicate a considerable amount of time and effort in complying with funding models. NGOs are thus compelled to avoid strategies that might jeopardise their funding, and to stick to a self-inflicted discipline that nevertheless flows from institutions (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). In this vein, Dhunpath (2004) claims that in Post-apartheid South Africa, the dependency of NGOs on external funding drives them to take on their donors' agendas and a logic of efficiency, that necessitate adopting businesslike forms of accountability (see chapter 7), which also implies the professionalization of the NGO staff.

The NGOization argument does not apply only to the development or service-provision sectors, but also to feminist organizing. Tsikata (2009) describes NGOization as “the lack of a mass base, connection and accountability; donor dependence; the substitution of NGOs for civil society and mass movements; the prioritization of a professional technocratic approach over politics because NGOs cannot overtly political or partisan; and a short-term project-based approach and the favoring of magic bullets over long-range broad agendas in the struggle for women's rights and gender equality”(186). Other feminist organizations' scholars such as Hodžic (2014) support the general view that the rise of feminist NGOs have facilitated the “depoliticization of social and women's movements, their appropriation by donor-driven agendas, and a neoliberal co-optation of feminist practice” (222); however, she also warns against the NGO paradigm dominating feminist knowledge about NGOs, thus limiting the space for debate.

In light of all this, even though the causes of NGOization are systemic, it is not hard to see how the infiltration of NGOization dynamics in NGOs-local community relationships can be largely attributed to donors, as they are the ones that set the rules of the game. The relationship between NGOs and communities can become one of power held by the NGO with the community often forced to respond appropriately to the NGO's real or perceived wishes (Power, Maury, and Maury 2002). Similarly, NGOs must respond appropriately to donors' wishes in order to secure the stream of funds. This makes donors' conditions on funding an important determinant of NGO's (downward) accountability to the communities they work with. Indeed, NGOization processes indicate the ways in which “funding and other material support can orient organizations to prioritize institutional survival

and maintenance at the expense of mobilization”, and how “NGO/movements actions may be shaped by material incentives” at the expenses of movements and communities (Choudry and Kapoor 2013, 5). In this vein, Chahim and Prakash (2014) indicate that NGO funding, especially from abroad, favors the “modern” and professionalized NGO sector over more traditional forms of organizing. Bearing in mind that foreign-funded NGOs tend to be more accountable to donors than to local communities, this can have grave implications for the local embeddedness and the sustainability of donor-funded initiatives, by posing accessibility problems to local organizations that are closer to local communities.

Van Zyl, Claeys, and Flambard's (2019) research on NGO accountability in the South African context reveals that local embeddedness of CSOs has a weight in determining whether they “NGOize” or not. In particular, they found confirmation that non-local NGOs focus significantly more on being accountable to donors than to their beneficiaries, thus confirming that local NGOs are generally more closely related to the communities they serve than to donors (see Kaldor 2003).

The literature also shows that there are “ways out” of NGOization, for example for those NGOs that manage to access funding that is not specifically linked to reporting requirements, result-based, or in Andrews' words (2014, 100) that manage to obtaining “grants with subjective or abstract requirements”. Those NGOs seem to have better chances to respond effectively to the needs of the beneficiaries, are more likely to take the time and efforts necessary to adapt their strategies to the specificities of the context, and to co-produce strategies for enhancing participation and inclusion of the beneficiaries. Context-specificity of initiatives and a deep knowledge of the context are indeed of utmost importance in contexts where local struggles take place.

In this work I assume that the NGOization argument applies not only to conflictual social movements but also to environmental NGOs (see Choudry 2013), and not only to international and northern based NGOs, but also to local, “southern” NGOs, that nevertheless are accountable to a vast array of donors, mostly international. Choudry (2013) finds that environmental NGOs often serve elite economic and political interests and are themselves deeply colonial in their practice and discourse. In his case study on NGOization practices of environmental NGOs, Choudry relates to the “projectization” factor of NGOization to make the case for the compartmentalized nature of many NGO campaigns, that

reduces systems to issues (agro-ecology, climate change adaptation, etc.), thus overlooking the systemic nature of many environmental issues, and decouples people from nature, promoting an understanding of nature which excludes humans.

Following Lang (2013), the NGOization argument can thus help researchers to pinpoint the conditions that negatively affect the NGOs' efforts towards local community participation; indeed, NGOization can be described as a sensitizing concept, that suggests directions along which to look when we try to explain twenty-first century's civil society (Lang 2013, 43). It follows that the presence of rules that foster NGOization dynamics on NGOs under analysis, —namely professionalization, projectization, institutionalization— indicate cases where donors are the conveyor of these global-neoliberalist processes that hamper NGOs' efforts towards local community participation. In this vein, I assume that the NGOization theory offers a framework for analyzing the potential consequences of donors providing funds on NGOs efforts to foster local community participation (Meyers 2016).

In addition, following Findley, Milner, and Nielson (2017), it is reasonable to assume that different types of donors can have different influences on NGOs work, and consequently, through NGOization dynamics, have different impacts on the procedural dimension of environmental justice in donor-funded environmental projects. There is a gap in terms of empirical studies on how donors shape NGOs' work with local communities; indeed, the way donor provisions affect environmental justice, and specifically its procedural dimension through NGO funding, has not been analyzed comparatively so far.

1.6 Introduction of the context of the research

1.6.1 Environmentalism in South Africa

Environmental mobilizations in the Global South have a lively history and exist within local, national and transnational networks. Environmental justice is a lens through which they can be analyzed in order to include broader social justice issues following the assumption that the environment is where you live (Death 2014). Environmental priorities change across geographical and class lines around the world. For example, in the Global South there are several instances of what can be termed the environmentalism of the poor (see Davey 2009), that contests the unequal distribution of ecological goods and evils and focuses on people's right to nature. Della Porta and Rucht (2002, 7) point out that, in the Global South, environmental activists are not predominantly a well-educated and affluent middle class but are rather part of the poor and deprived classes (native peoples, small farmers, and fishermen). Moreover, environmental issues in the South are often closely intertwined with other issues such as economic survival, civil rights, democracy, the condition of women and the protection of indigenous cultures.

This kind of environmentalism differs from conservation environmentalism as its struggles are not concentrated on the conservation of wilderness as a realm separated from human interference, or on green economy or environmental efficiency, and does not necessarily frame campaigns as environmental, because they are seen as primarily social and political. Indeed, activists see theirs as struggles for livelihood and community ownership. The focus is on local issues rather than global endeavors and the actors involved in such conflicts sometimes do not see themselves as environmentalists, even though their struggles revolve around concerns that have an environmental character such as water scarcity, sanitation, degradation and soil erosion, mining and commercial forestry among other issues.

Moreover, in certain contexts, devising a struggle as environmental is not a successful strategy, because of the presence of political and social issues that are perceived as more pressing, and that are generally considered as disconnected from environmental narratives such as housing, land issues,

health, crime, racism and inequality (Death 2014). As some issues can be considered environmental in character but are not always framed in this way, some of the NGOs under analysis who focus on issues such as water security, land tenure and sustainable agriculture frame their campaigns as not only environmental, but first and foremost as social justice issues.

Moving the focus to the national context of this research, South Africa has a rich history of both rural and urban environmental activism and is characterized by contested, diverse, multifunctional contexts that makes it a relevant context to studying relationships between communities and external supporting actors (Cockburn et al. 2019).

There have been a number of movements organizing around issues of basic needs and services such as housing, land use, the fight against extractivism and food sovereignty, that are also environmental in character but not framed as such. This is because of the country's recent history with colonialism and apartheid, "the former white élites domination of the mainstream approaches to environmental politics and the presence of political issues that are perceived as more pressing by marginalized communities, and which are conceptualized as social rather than environmental" (Death 2014, 7). Indeed, there are a number of issues that are environmental in kind, that are intertwined with social justice issues and that are ascribable to climate adaptation measures (Du Plessis 2016; Cock 2004). Some examples include land tenure, food sovereignty, waste disposal and water management, all issues that imply the management of shared natural resources, in a broad sense, and that are seen as overwhelming priorities for local communities in the Global South.

According to Death (2014), attempts of framing pressing social issues also as environmental in the South African context have the potential to contribute to building an environmental movement which involves larger groups and that can evolve towards a more coherent and cohesive environmentalism. As mentioned earlier, to achieve this goal, environmental issues should be framed in "the environment is where you live" terms, instead of holding to conservationist narratives, and be linked to identity, ethnicity and gender issues that are bearers of injustices. In relation to these divisions, the literature in the domain of environmental management and governance in the global South often describes environmental issues with their objectives, complexities and strategies with reference to the

allegorical *brown* and *green* agendas and the differences between the two (Du Plessis 2016). The green environmental agenda is typically involved in ecosystem protection and the prevention of the degradation of natural resources such as soil, water, and biodiversity. As such, its long-term focus is on the protection and the improvement of the human conditions on an intergenerational basis in relation to ecosystems and on the delayed, dispersed and ecological effects of human activity at different scales. The first order goal to be achieved is ecosystem health, the scale of action is regional or global, and the most emphasized aspects of the relationship between humans and nature is the protection of resources, which should be “used less” in order to guarantee their protection and the fruition of environmental services and benefits to future generations. In a different vein, the *brown* agenda focuses on the “here and now” and on the interlinkages between social and environmental issues. It tackles the patterns of consumption and production that result in the unequal access to opportunities, resources and services, that in turn result in environmental injustices. The brown agenda focuses on the vulnerabilities of the poor and on issues related to sanitation, housing, infrastructures and waste collection among others. It has a more localized and immediate character aimed at improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups. It follows that the main goal the mobilizations around brown issues is the provision of more and better-quality environmental services, with an emphasis on the inadequate access to natural resources or poor quality of life of lower income groups. The brown agenda remains the priority for marginalized communities, and it often does not converge with the green agenda. For example, conservation logics, while generally conducive to increased protection of resources and systems, can have the drawback of hampering or limiting people’s access to those very resources that are be vital for their livelihood. Given these different attitudes and priorities, how can the ecologically sustainable development agenda and pro-poor development and environmental health agenda interrelate? “How is this possible to connect an ecological and intergenerational vision of environmentalism with the satisfaction of basic needs and the fulfilment of basic capabilities when the vulnerability of the urban poor, the dire state of livelihoods in various urban and rural areas, exposure to pollution as a result of apartheid spatial planning legacies and the basic needs for food, housing, health-care, water services and sanitation infrastructure and waste collection remain critical issues?” (Du Plessis 2016, 24). Following Death (2014), framing environmental issues as socio-environmental, by stressing the

interconnectedness between social grievances and the exploitation of the natural environment in which they take place is key for persuading large segments of the population that the issues tackled by environmental movements are objects of everyday social and economic concerns.

On paper, the South African environmental framework is conducive to support environmental struggles. South Africa has been the first country in the world to enshrine the right to a clean and safe environment in its Constitution (Patel 2014). However, despite the rhetoric embracing sustainability and environmental justice, the poor and the natural environment continue to be marginalized in decision-making, because, following Patel (2009), flaws in these provisions are hindering the ability to serve the public interest in a way that promotes social and environmental justice. In fact, the vagueness of this right and the onerous nature of the legal system makes environmental rights an area that is yet to be tested in the Constitutional court (Patel 2014). First of all, the Constitution of South Africa envisages in the Bill of Rights, section 24 that: “everyone has the right (a) to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and (b) to have the environment protected for present and future generations through reasonable legislation and other measures that: (i) prevent pollution and damage to the natural resources; (ii) promote conservation; and (iii) secure ecological sustainable development and use of resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development”⁶. The Bill of Rights is applicable to all laws, meaning that the obligation imposed by section 24 is binding on all government organs of states and also on private entities. Other sections of the Constitution, e.g. the right to human dignity, enforcing rights, access to information also play an important role in environmental justice discourse in South Africa.

The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) embodies environmental justice principles in several of its provisions: it states that environmental management must place people and their needs at the forefront of its concern, and serve their physical, psychological, developmental, cultural and social interests equitably, and that environmental justice must be pursued so that adverse environmental impacts shall not be distributed in such a manner as to unfairly discriminate against any person, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged people. Also, the participation of all interested and affected

⁶ <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf> last access 02/18/2020

parties in environmental governance must be promoted, and all people should have the opportunity to develop the understanding, skills and capacities necessary for achieving equitable and effective participation. In fact, after apartheid, the promise to address questions of environmental justice was particularly compelling, also due to the importance of the more democratic and participative mechanisms inherent in sustainable development approaches (Patel 2009; McDonald 2002).

1.6.2 Donors and NGOization in South Africa

Differently from other African countries, the NGO sector in South Africa is well established, and the number of local NGOs is high. Together with the lively environmental activism, this makes South Africa a valuable context for exploring NGOs-local community relationships and how they are influenced by donors.

The liveliness of South African Civil Society also results from donors' preference, during apartheid, to channel aid through NGOs rather than dealing with the apartheid government. During apartheid, many civil society efforts were funded by foreign donors, with funds channeled to civil society groups in the struggle against apartheid. This aid was political, as the goal of this funding was, for the most part, to support and accelerate the collapse of apartheid. In this context, donors did not adhere to the same strict funding policies that were required of groups in countries with different political environments. Indeed, because of the apartheid government's strict controls, donors and civil society groups tried to avoid financial scrutiny by being deliberately non-transparent in their funding practices, and consequently, there was no real donor oversight on how funds were spent (Hearn 2000).

International funding increased in the 1980s also due to the gradual political reforms that were taking place, and this caused a proliferation of NGOs (Zyl and Claeys 2019). According to Kabane (2010) the years before 1984 were highly conducive to the strengthening of civil society in South Africa, especially for anti-apartheid or social change organizations that received support and sympathy from external sources, as foreign donors saw these organizations as legitimate vehicles for channeling funds. Especially in the last years of regime, the amount of funding was substantial: between 1985 and 1994,

support to local CSOs from EU member states and the US amounted to an unprecedented \$340 million (Hearn, 2000).

The Civil Society landscape in South Africa changed considerably after the end of apartheid in 1994. Under apartheid, international donors funded Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that basically worked against the government, providing assistance to the part of the population that was denied basic rights, and in their fight against apartheid (Mueller-Hirth 2009). After 1994, the focus of donors changed accordingly, from human rights to individual liberal rights; international donors included the ANC government as recipient of aid, while only a few of the previously funded CSOs continued to receive funds (Hearn 2001; Bond 2001). Consequently, if local CSOs wanted to continue receiving (international) funding, they had to adapt, and shift from popular struggles to policy-making and service-delivery for the state (Xaba 2015).

Similarly, funds began to be channeled from grassroots organizations to formal and professionalized NGOs (Habib 2005). This caused NGOs to have a turn for institutional survival, with the consequence of losing accountability to the grassroots (Habib and Kotze 2015).

In a newly established democratic state, but still deeply unequitable, donor organizations saw the consolidation of democracy as their primary objective, instead of thoroughly addressing socio-economic inequalities, and funds were largely distributed to organizations that took the promotion of democratic principles as their primary mission (Wiggill 2014; Xaba 2015). In this vein, many NGOs started to disengage from the social movements they supported during apartheid, working with the government instead of marching in the streets, thus contributing to hold back the oppositional struggles of marginalized local communities (Sinwell 2013). Leonard (2014) goes as far as claiming that Post-apartheid civil society in South Africa is just a loose definition for those organizations that implement the state's, big businesses and donors' agendas, without addressing the needs and claims of the grassroots. Indeed, since the end of the apartheid regime, the CSOs that have created relationships with powerful actors have been receiving a large share of development aid. The downside of it is that, in turn, this has jeopardized their accountability to marginalized communities. This is due to the process of NGOization that has been going on since the transition to democracy; indeed, international donor

agencies consider civil society as crucial for the establishment of democratic societies (Leonard 2014).

Mueller-Hirth (2009) adds that the role of formal and professionalized NGOs in post-apartheid South Africa has been extensively emphasized by the post-apartheid state, to the detriment of downward accountability. It follows that the same organizations that during the struggle against apartheid were the champions of the rights of the marginalized, became co-opted by the states and donors' development agendas afterwards. Also in the domain of environmental governance, Cock and Fig (2001) find that after apartheid, environmental NGOs were trained by NGOs professionals for attracting donors' finance. The environmental sector became thus more and more professionalized and intertwined with public participation and development facilitation.

In light of this, it can be claimed that a particular donors' understanding of what local civil society's priorities should be, changed and to some extent narrowed the civil society landscape in the post-apartheid South Africa, contributing to the professionalization and depoliticization of local civil society. However, as it will become clearer in the next chapters, this was not the case for all donors and CSOs. The next sections provide a classification of donors and an overview of the five donors that constitute my case studies and of the NGOs that receive funding from them.

1.7 Case studies

1.7.1 Donors classification

I expect different donors' provisions to have different impacts on NGOs' efforts towards community participation, and I assume that these provisions are to some extent determined by different donors' organizational structures and backgrounds (Honig and Gulrajani 2018). I have selected the donors that constitute the object of my research by searching on the websites of local South African civil society organizations that were supposed to be the focus of my original research project. The literature on environmental justice provides sound benchmarks against which to evaluate donors'

provisions in relation to community participation, and in addition, my findings are integrated by my analysis of NGOs' perceptions about donors' provisions.

To my knowledge, the literature on civil society does not provide comparative studies about donors, besides comparisons between bilateral and multilateral donor organizations (see Gulrajani 2016; Biscaye, Reynolds, and Anderson 2017). To my knowledge, there are also no donor organizations' categorization to be found in peer-reviewed journals. For this reason, I have identified five typologies of donors that constitute the object of my study, based both on academic and gray literature.

Bilateral and Multilateral aid

Bilateral aid occurs when money or other resources are transferred by one government to a recipient country. Bilateral aid is usually performed by large institutional donors such as state development agencies. Most industrialized countries that provide foreign aid belong to a donors' club known as Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), that provide Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Haslam, Schafer, and Beaudet 2021). The OECD defines bilateral operations as those carried out by a donor country directly with a developing country. They include transactions with NGOs active in development and other development-related operations such as debt relief and administrative costs (Gulrajani 2016). A characteristic of bilateral donors is that they need to be backed by their own governments; indeed, projects funded by bilateral donors are more likely to be subject to political influence because bilateral donor organizations are supposed to meet the commitments of donors' home governments (Uddin and Belal 2019; Suarez and Gugerty 2016).

Differently, in multilateral programs, contributions from individual donors are pooled, forming part of the service provided by an international donor institution. Multilateral agencies are supposed to have a greater autonomy from the single organizations that participate in it, thus preventing political capture, and should be able to act in politically sensitive situations where sovereign countries might lack neutrality and credibility (Gulrajani 2016). Multilateral aid cannot be delivered by states but can

be provided only by an international institution that conducts its activities for development purposes. In order to be defined as multilateral aid, the flow of funds must become an integral part of the recipient institution's resources, and basically become core funding. On the contrary, if donors maintain control over multilateral contributions so much that decisions regarding fund disposal are taken at the donor's discretion, this type of funding is defined as bilateral. (OECD 2015, 24).

Although bilateral flows can be spent through a variety of channels, most bilateral transactions are done through the public-sector. On the other hand, multilateral flows can be only spent through multilateral channels, that generally correspond to five multilateral organizations: the European Union (EU), the World Bank International Development Association, the Regional Development Banks, the United Nations Program, Funds and Specialized Agencies and the Global Fund for Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) (Gulrajani 2016).

Following Mueller-Hirth (2012, 13), bi-and multilateral donors are found to be those who have the most "unreasonable expectations", demanding "extensive paperwork and exact adherence to formalistic demands", whereas foundations or grant-making northern NGOs appear to be more adaptable, flexible, and culturally-sensitive.

As outlined in section 1.6.2, international bilateral assistance to South African civil society began as early as the 1960s and continued through until the transition in 1994. The nordic countries were among the first to provide this type of support, with Sweden donating about US\$400 million to anti-apartheid groups such as the ANC, labor unions, and others between 1972 and 1993. By the 1980s, South Africa had been ostracized in the international political community, and economic sanctions were imposed to the country. At this time, civil society support for the anti-apartheid effort came from donors such as the European Union, Britain, the United States, Germany, and France (Pillay 2014).

While ODA remains important and high in absolute terms for South Africa, its sources are diversified, showing the country is not aid-dependent but rather, aid expands domestic resources in addressing key developmental priorities. South Africa receives ODA from OECD countries mostly in the form of grants and in-kind support. Overall, ODA makes up approximately 1% of the country's

budget, and the South African government uses ODA mostly to help address the country's development and transformation priorities; indeed, foreign aid mainly assists South Africa in its economic development efforts and to reduce high poverty rates associated with apartheid's past. Also, South Africa has high levels of HIV/AIDS and, as such, it receives substantial funding from the Global Fund which is also one of its largest donors (Pillay 2014). However, the South African government also receives significant foreign funding for the conservation of the environment, as an important biodiversity hub. For example, the cooperation between the EU and South Africa in the green economy dates back to the establishment in 2007 of what is today known as the Joint Forum on Environment, Climate Change, Sustainable Development and Water⁷. The EU-supported initiatives include policy dialogues on issues such as natural resource management, food waste, circular economy and natural capital accounting. Indeed, among South Africa's foreign development partner, the EU is the most important, with rich bilateral cooperation programs reinforced by grants for thematic focal areas⁸.

Foundations, Faith-Based Organizations and Corporate Aid

Non-governmental aid actors are complex organizations that differ greatly in their organizational structures and purposes. To date, there is still limited research on the nature of their priorities in development, their modes of implementing assistance, their relationships with developing country partners, and their relationships with aid programs (Horn 2017).

In the nonprofit sector, the term foundation has no precise meaning. The Council on Foundations⁹ defines a foundation as “an entity that supports charitable activities by making grants to unrelated organizations or institutions or to individuals for scientific, educational, cultural, religious, or other charitable purposes”¹⁰. Public foundations are grantmaking public organizations that can obtain

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/relations_south_africa_en.htm, last access 12/9/2022

⁸ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/south-africa/european-union-and-south-africa_en?s=120, last access 12/9/2022

⁹ The Council on Foundations, founded in 1949, is a nonprofit leadership association of grantmaking foundations and corporations.

¹⁰ <https://www.cof.org/content/foundation-basics> last access 2/2/21

their funds from a variety of different sources, such as other foundations, individuals, corporations or public entities. Public foundations may also carry out fundraising activities or seek public financial support.

Unlike private foundations, public foundations are supported by the public and are thus more subject to public scrutiny than their private counterparts, thus helping to ensure adherence to standards of conduct. As a distinct category in the realm of foundations, corporate foundations are established by companies. However, despite the existence of linkages between corporate foundations and their sources of funding, foundations as organizational forms are considered to be independent from its parent company.

US foundations largely contribute to development programs in South Africa, according to statistics from the Foundation Center¹¹, but there are also numerous foundations in other countries that support South African NGOs, including foundations in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany. For example, the German foundation Heinrich Böll Stiftung (associated with the German Green party) has an office in Cape Town¹². However, also domestic philanthropy contributes to South African development programs, especially corporate aid in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funding. CSR funding has become increasingly important for NGOs in South Africa and this is due largely to the adoption of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) legislation. Indeed, formalized philanthropy has a longer history in South Africa compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries. The advent of democracy led to the passing of various pieces of transformational legislation including the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act 53 of 2003¹³, which requires listed companies to contribute at least 1% of net profits after tax to support socio-economic development¹⁴. In order to reach beneficiaries and local communities, corporations often channel their social investment through NGOs and other CSOs (Mueller-Hirth 2016). Cooperation between

¹¹ <https://fconline.foundationcenter.org/>, last access 12/9/2022

¹² <https://www.fundsforngos.org/developing-countries-2/south-africa/alternative-sources-funding-south-african-ngos/>, last access 12/9/2022

¹³ https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/a53-030.pdf, last access 12/9/2022

¹⁴ <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/26132/south-africa-report21.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, last access 12/9/2022

corporations and NGOs are becoming increasingly significant for South African development, so much that corporate South Africa is the biggest funder of non-profits in South Africa, also through corporate foundations, that receive annual allocations from their parent companies. However, this kind of funding does not come without problems. Some of them include discrepancies with the donor companies' business strategies, for example for what concerns social and environmental issues, the fact that "CSR has not been widened to include core business practices and address the root causes of deepening inequalities" (Mueller-Hirth 2016, 65), and the depoliticization of development through business solutions (Rajak 2011). These discrepancies have consequences on how NGOs view CSR funds; Pickard (2007) suggests that some consider corporate funding as being morally corrupted, and thus difficult to accept.

Finally, within the non-government development sector, organizations with a faith basis play an important role. Faith based organizations (FBOs) are mostly formal organizations whose identity and mission are explicitly derived from the teaching of a religious tradition and are funded by religious institutions. In this sense, FBOs have two identities: "the first is as a development agency seeking to improve the material well-being of the poor, while the second is that of a religious organization whose existence is forged from a faith basis and its understanding of religious tenets" (Clarke and Ware 2015, 41). FBOs emerged as key actors in development in the last few decades (Lipsky 2011), but despite the significant presence of FBOs within the wide field of aid and development, there are no thorough studies about the similarities or distinctions between donors that are faith-based and secular.

This section has provided an overview of the types of donors included in this study, and their main specificities from an organizational perspective; I now turn to an overview of the donors that constitute my case studies, that I classify according to the types of organizations identified in the short review here above.

1.7.2 Donors

Brot für die Welt (BfdW)

BfdW is the development and relief agency of the Protestant Churches in Germany, and a member of the of the Protestant Agency for Diakonie and Development (EWDE). BfdW is a member of various national and international networks and works closely with other aid agencies, providing funds to both church and non-church partner organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. The financial pillars of BfdW are individual donations and collections, Church funds, and funding from the German Ministry of development and co-operation and the EU.

The work of BfdW focuses on food security, promoting education and health, strengthening democracy, respect for human rights, equality between men and women and the “integrity of creation”¹⁵.

BfdW’s values are based on Christian faith. It supports partner organizations mainly through financial support, but also by providing them with development experts and volunteers, and by awarding scholarships. In addition, in Germany and Europe, BfdW aims at influencing political decisions in favor of the poor and marginalized through lobbying, public relations and educational work, and to create awareness of the need for a sustainable way of life and business.

Delegation of the EU in South Africa – Climate Change Champions Initiative (2020-2024)

The delegation of the EU in South Africa (from now on called EU) is categorized as a bilateral donor as the *EU* institutions provide almost exclusively *bilateral aid*, although a fifth of this is earmarked support through other multilateral institutions¹⁶.

¹⁵ [https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/downloads/Allgemein/BfdW Terms of Reference Evaluation Climate Lighthouse Projects.pdf](https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/downloads/Allgemein/BfdW_Terms_of_Reference_Evaluation_Climate_Lighthouse_Projects.pdf) last access 22/5/22

¹⁶ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/c0ad1f0d-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/5e331623-en&csp=b14d4f60505d057b456dd1730d8fcea3&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=chapter>, last access 3/4/22

The EU delegations around the world create country roadmaps for partner countries, with the purpose of developing a common framework for the engagement of EU Delegations and Member States with local CS. Funding for South African NGOs is thus available both under programs run by the European Commission in Brussels, and by the EU delegation in South Africa. The EU delegation in South Africa supports work carried out by local CSOs in different ways. One of them through the budget support to the African Government, another one is through the CSOs thematic program. The Climate Change Champions call for grants was issued under the CSOs thematic program for the period 2014-2020. The CSO thematic program has the objective of strengthening civil society organizations and local authorities in EU partner countries, among which South Africa. Promoting an enabling environment for CSOs and local authorities, voicing and structuring their collective demands of citizens, supporting sustainable development are some of the specific priorities of the thematic program. Through the CSO thematic program, the EU has provided funding for several EU delegations around the world, and in the case of South Africa, the delegation staff chose climate change as focus of the call after holding consultations with local CSOs to define the scope of the call.

The amount of funding disbursed for this call for grant is of almost EUR 2,000,000, and at the time of writing, the projects funded under the *Climate Change Champions Initiative* are at their inception. The NGOs under analysis in relation to the EU are the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), Indigo Development and Change, Green Cape, the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) and WWF-South Africa.

Green Trust

The WWF Nedbank Green Trust is a Corporate Foundation, the charitable vehicle of a for-profit corporation, which provides the funding for grants. Co-founded by Nedbank and WWF-SA in 1990, the WWF Nedbank Green Trust is part of Nedbank's CSR efforts and supports nature conservation projects (Mohanty 2016). It was established in 1990 to promote the conservation of nature and ecological processes. The Trust is an independent legal entity governed by a Board of Trustees. Nedbank, a South African Bank, is the founder of the Trust and WWF was appointed for the

management, and subsequently for the environmental strategy of the Trust. The Green Trust aims at preserving species and ecosystem diversity, ensuring a sustainable use of natural resources, promoting actions aimed at reducing pollution and wasteful exploitation of natural resources, and ensuring the “environmental health and wealth” of South Africa¹⁷. The Green Trust invests in organizations that contribute to generating a “return” in environmental projects., meaning that projects funded by the Green Trust that must be innovative, transferable, and up-scalable at a national-regional level, with a budget of R 3 million (EUR 180.000) over 3 years.

Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)

The CEPF is a joint program of six different organizations: the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the financial institution of France’s Development Assistance Policy; the EU; the Global Environment Facility (the world’s largest public funder of environmental projects, formed by 182 governments with international development institutions, CSOs and the private sector); the Government of Japan, the World Bank, and finally, Conservation International (CI), a major conservation INGO, considered as part of the “Big Green “, along with The Nature Conservancy and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (Choudry 2013).

The CEPF objective is to protect the world’s biodiversity and promote sustainable development. To maximize the impact of limited funds, the CEPF decided to only work in biodiversity hotspots, that are areas that contain at least 1,500 species of plants found nowhere else on Earth (known as endemic species) and that have lost at least 70 % of their primary native vegetation, making them biologically rich yet threatened regions. Unlike other conservation funds, the CEPF chose to directly engage local civil society, to ensure the sustainability of their conservation projects. Indeed, the CEPF aims at bringing together the capital and expertise of the CEPF’s donor organizations with the innovative ideas and participatory approaches originating from the grassroots to solving local challenges. In South

¹⁷ <https://www.greentrust.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WWF-Nedbank-Green-Trust-Funding-Guidelines-2020-2.pdf> last access 21/4/22

Africa, the CEPF invested in conservation projects in the Cape Floristic Region and the Succulent Karoo from the period 2001-2012.

Thousand Currents (TC)

TC is a public foundation that provides financial assistance to SMOs and NGOs in developing countries in Asia, South America and Africa. It is funded by private donations and by several donors, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Wallace Global Fund, the NoVo Foundation, and the Libra Foundation¹⁸. TC primarily provides grants to NGOs and SMOs, both registered and unregistered, led by women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples that focus on building food sustainability, fighting climate change, and developing alternative economic models for their communities across the world¹⁹.

In addition to grant-making, TC is carrying out a donor advocacy project, with the aim of “changing the way that donors in the Global North interact with grantees, challenging the traditional top-down, paternalistic model of international aid and philanthropy²⁰”. In addition to financial support, TC offers training opportunities, peer-learning opportunities and alliances with other partners and allies.

In addition to these five donors, the German bilateral donor Internationale Klimaschutzinitiative (IKI) was originally included in the sample. However, the initiative was relatively recently established, documentation on the website was scarce and attempts to gather data were unsuccessful. Thus, this donor was excluded from the sample. The Open Society Foundation SA (OSF-SA) was also included at the start and classified as private foundation. However very limited documentation was available on the websites, and the organization declared that they have very strict engagement policies with external actors. As a result, this case was also excluded from the sample.

The next section provides an overview of the NGOs that are or have been funded by the donors in my sample and of the projects they fund.

¹⁸ <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/thousand-currents/> last access 4/12/21

¹⁹ For the scope of this work I only take into consideration TC’s relationship with NGOs

²⁰ <https://thousandcurrents.org/faqs/> last access 5/2/22

Table 1 shows the classification of the donors in my sample

DONOR	CLASSIFICATION
<i>Delegation of the European Union to South Africa (EU)</i>	Bilateral
<i>Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)</i>	Bilateral
<i>Thousands Currents (TC)</i>	Public foundation
<i>Green Trust</i>	Corporate Foundation
<i>Brot für die Welt (BfdW)</i>	Faith-Based organization

1.7.3 Funded NGOs and projects

My NGO sample is selected on the basis of the donors investigated. It is made of seven South African NGOs that differ in size, level of institutionalization, and main focus. They all value local community recognition and participation, at least for the scope of the projects under analysis. Being funded—in the past or in the present— by one of the donors in my sample, is the main selection criterion, together with availability of documentation.

Here follows an overview of the organizations that constitute my case studies, according to their principal focus. In the next section, they are described and analyzed more in detail.

Although all the organizations under analysis can be described as local and as having local community participation as part of their mission, the organizations under analysis have different features. Two of the organizations in my sample are NGOs that were founded during apartheid, have a very local focus (districts or provinces), and deal primarily with social justice issues connected to land, and so, by extension, to environmental issues. These organizations are the Surplus People Project (SPP) and the Association for Rural Advancement Land Rights Advocacy (AFRA). Another of the NGOs

included, Indigo Development and Change, has a similar local focus (provincial) as well as social justice and community empowerment as important tenets of their work. In addition, Indigo has more specific environmental ambitions, such as climate change mitigation and adaptation programs, biodiversity conservation, agroecology, and a strong focus on policy-making.

The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) represents a network of community-based organizations with an even more local character (neighborhood or village) and very specific campaigns to counter environmental injustices.

Another category of organizations, represented by WWF-South Africa, have a national focus and generally a “top-down” approach to environmental projects, and several environmental thematic focuses. Green Cape, on the other hand, has a focus on three provinces in South Africa, and represents a type of NGO that is oriented towards green economy and technical solutions and their replicability on larger scales rather than community-based empowerment, but that have adopted a more bottom-up approach for the purposes of a specific project.

Finally, another type of organization under analysis is the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) that works with CBOs and local communities on various issues such as gender-based violence, youth projects, food security and offers services such as advice offices, capacity building and mentorship to rural communities. SCAT is a re-granting organization that is working specifically on an environmental project for the first time.

The NGOs under analysis are all funded by one or more of the five donors in my sample. Here follows a more accurate description of each one of them and the projects that they carry out with the sampled donors’ funding.

Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA)

AFRA was founded in 1979 to support the struggle against forced removals of people in KwaZulu-Natal under Apartheid. Since 1994, it focuses on land injustices, and it helps rural communities regain the land they lost during apartheid. AFRA’s aim is to empower and mobilize farm-dwellers to act on

their own behalf and promote direct participation in all matters that affect them. Indeed, AFRA has a rooted participatory and bottom-up approach and works in partnership with rural communities.

AFRA also works with similar-minded organizations for lobbying activities and advocacy campaigns to influence both national and local policies. Indeed, AFRA is part of two NGOs networks: *Tshintsha Amakhaya*, an (informal) alliance for land and food justice in South Africa, and the LandNESS network, a consortium of CSOs that promotes people-centered land governance.

AFRA does not have a specific environmental focus but assumes that social and environmental justice are deeply intertwined and that basic services such as water, sanitation and waste disposal have an environmental character. AFRA's geographical focus is local, as it works primarily in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal. Over the years AFRA has received funds from a wide range of donors, that include bilateral aid, support from public foundations, and from other NGOs and NGOs networks. Current funders include the Commonwealth Foundation, the Raith Foundation the EU and BfdW. Specifically, AFRA is carrying out an EU-funded project named *Innovative Partnerships for Change: Raising New Climate Change Initiatives and Champions*, and a BfdW-funded project named *Farm Dweller Advancement Project*.

AFRA formed a consortium with Indigo, the Institute of National Resources (INR), the Farmer Support Group of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (FSG) and the Heifer Project South Africa (HPSA) to carry out the project funded by the EU under the Climate Change Champions Initiative.

Projects

Two of AFRA's projects are under analysis, one funded by the EU, and the other by BfdW.

The *Innovative Partnerships for Change: Raising New Climate Change Initiatives and Champions*, funded by the EU, starts from the assumption that CSOs in the land and agriculture sectors are relatively uninformed about climate change and corresponding range of available adaptation and mitigation strategies. Many CSOs believe they are not sufficiently equipped to support the communities they serve.

In addition, they believe that land and agricultural CSOs have not been able to develop coherent national strategies and advocacy campaigns to support small scale farmers with climate change strategies to address the climate change impacts on land tenure, and the farming systems of small-scale farmers. In this vein, the consortium led by AFRA intends to identify and promote the already existing adaptation and mitigation strategies of small-scale farmers, educate NGOs in the agricultural sectors about the causes and impacts of climate change on small-scale farmers, and strengthen CSOs networks working in this direction. To achieve these goals, AFRA and its partners organized several activities. First of all, capacity-building on climate change, including trainings and participatory workshops, based on a “train the trainer” approach, so that the CSOs that participate in the workshops are able to strengthen the capacity of the communities they serve. Secondly, they aim at developing written material for the land and agriculture sector on climate change, to be translated into local languages; thirdly, learning exchanges for the youth of the different communities where AFRA works, and learning journeys that involve all project stakeholders. Lastly, but most importantly, they aim at working with local communities by jointly identifying local approaches and innovations to tackle climate change.

The *Farm Dweller Advancement Project*, funded by BfdW, is a follow-up of another project that sought to ensure the realization and protection of the constitutional rights of occupiers, farm workers, and labor tenants (jointly referred to as Farm Dwellers), that live and/or work on commercial farms in South Africa. The project is designed to transfer skills and build capacity whilst working with farm dwellers and community-based organization in their communities. The objectives are firstly to provide Farm Dwellers with improved living conditions and livelihoods, with the delivery of basic services such as quality water, sanitation, and adequate refuse collection (thus making it an instance of brown agenda as explained in former sections). Secondly, the project has a strong advocacy vocation, as it aims at influencing policy and legislation to favor the advancement of farm dwellers rights and the development of sustainable settlements, through workshops with community representatives from across the KwaZulu-Natal region.

Indigo Development and Change

Indigo Development and Change started in 2000, with their head offices in Nieuwoudtville, Northern Cape. Indigo facilitates the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and carries out capacity development programs of biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation programs in rural areas of South Africa, with the aim to contributing to a socially just society. For its work, Indigo relies on participatory approaches that involve local communities. As AFRA, it is part of NGOs networks such as the Adaptation Fund, and partnered up with AFRA, INR, HPSA and the FSG for carrying out the EU project selected by the *Climate Change Champions* call for grants. Besides its work on the ground, Indigo also has a strong focus on policy, and has both developed local and global networks to link local processes to global dialogue and policy. Indigo's geographical focus is thus both local (the Suid-Bokkeveld in the Western Cape), and global, where they have official UNFCCC observer status since 2011. Over the years, Indigo has received bilateral aid and foundation funding, both from national and international and national institutions. Current funders include the Green Trust, the EU, and the South African National Lotteries Commission. The project funded by the Green Trust is about the *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld*, while the EU-funded project, *Innovative Partnerships for Change: Raising New Climate Change Initiatives and Champions* is carried out with AFRA as leading partner and is described in the former section.

Projects

The *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld*, project has the aim of developing the capacity of small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld Plateau in Climate in Smart Agriculture (CSA), and promote the sustainable stewardship of the unique biodiversity of the area. The project engages about twenty small-scale farmers (a combination of male and female small-scale livestock and rooibos farmers) with the aim to increase the climate resilience of arid areas' agriculture to the impacts of climate change and protecting the regions' unique biodiversity through sustainable farming. The proposed project has a community-driven approach to ensure that the design and expected environmental and socio-economic outcomes are in line with the community's needs. Indeed, the

success of the project is based on whether the needs of the community are met and take ownership of the CSA techniques that are applicable for the local climatic conditions.

Green Cape

Green Cape is an NGO established in 2010 in Cape Town and aims at spreading green economy solutions in the Western Cape by promoting the potential of green technologies for the ecological transition. Green Cape wants to become globally relevant in leading the uptake of green economy infrastructures in the developing world, and support local, provincial and national government to build a resilient green economy. In addition to the provision of technical and expert knowledge, networking possibilities, and access to funding to spread the adoption of green economy solutions, Green Cape supports communities and citizens to bring their voices, their knowledge and capacities at the local and national level, with the aim to involve them in the institutional processes for the transition to cleaner and more sustainable energy. Green Cape mostly works in the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape and, over the years, they have received funds from both local and international funders. They are currently carrying out a project funded by the EU, and co-funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF), named *active climate change citizenship for a just transition in South Africa*.

Projects

The *Active climate change citizenship for a just transition in South Africa* aims at enabling engagement by communities, women and youth in climate mitigation and adaptation, with a particular focus on the energy component. This project has a clear policy aim, as it aims at making South Africans find their voice to meaningfully engage with national and local climate and energy policy to promote a fair energy transition in their communities in the Eastern, Western and Northern Cape. Moreover, the project aims at creating awareness in the youth about the (job) opportunities of the green economy.

Green Cape's approach is mostly "train the trainers", building capacity in a core group of CSOs and CBOs to train high school teachers and community organizations about renewable energy and climate change adaptations in ten communities in the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape.

Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT)

The Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) is human rights and social justice organization that has been active for 36 years, and that mainly acts through re-granting activities. SCAT fundraises from national and international donors, to develop granting programs organized as grants, field support and capacity building for community-based organizations (CBOs) that work with rural local communities in the Eastern, Western, and Northern Cape. The SCAT's CBO partners are mostly advice offices, food security and youth initiatives, where the main targets are women, children and youth, and the objective is to strengthen their capacity as agents for social change.

SCAT does not usually carry out project with a climate change focus, but they have a network in place that makes sure they can access expertise in every field. The project funded by the EU that SCAT is carrying out is named *Rural Action for Climate Resilience* and is co-funded by Heinrich Böll Foundation, which is also partner in implementing the project, together with the and *Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI)*.

Projects

Rural CBOs have a great capacity of enhancing their own communities' resilience to climate change, and the *Rural Action for a Climate Resilience* project addresses CBOs' absence from the formulation and implementation of South Africa's climate response efforts. In this vein, SCAT invests in CBOs' capacity building so that they can, in turn, build the local communities' capacities to address climate change and to lobby for measures that can enhance their climate resilience in the communities they serve.

The action takes place in the Free State, and Eastern, Western and Northern Cape, and involves faith-based leaders, who are also provided with expertise and resources to build their capacity to tackle climate change and project their communities' perspectives, knowledge and experiences into policymaking. Faith Leaders are also a key target group because they are generally deeply respected and influential in their communities. Moreover, recognition of the climate crisis among faith leaders has become more common, but they generally also have limited knowledge of adaptation and resilience-building approaches.

The first phase of the project is devoted to knowledge development of climate change for CBOs, so that they can foster climate change awareness in their own communities. After that, CBOs are supposed to become autonomous and are invited to apply for a *Climate Champions Micro Grant*, so they can undertake actions in their communities, with the priorities identified by the communities after they are informed. Like other EU funded projects, also this project has a strong policy component: the capacity built in and among rural CBOs and FLs should translate into their inclusion in the local, provincial and national discourse.

The logic behind this intervention is that rural CBOs are best placed to determine and lead context-appropriate climate responses, to enhance their communities' social, economic and environmental resilience, so that there can be a devolution of power to them. The objectives of the project are first of all that thirty rural CBOs/communities are informed about the climate emergency and its effects, and their voices are amplified in national, provincial and/or local policy deliberations on climate vulnerabilities. Secondly, eight communities/CBOs will go further, by getting the means to respond to localized climate crisis impacts through the micro-grants, with an emphasis on food and clean water access, and will do so by harnessing local knowledge and creativity. Since much of the action will be determined by rural partners, its precise impact in communities is difficult to predict.

WWF-South Africa

Among the organizations taken into analysis, WWF is the one that does not need much introduction. The South African branch of WWF international was funded in 1968. Starting as a wildlife conservation organization, in the 1970es and 1980es it expanded its work to conserve the environment as a whole, with the aim of ensuring the healthy functioning of species and communities that are an integral part of natural systems. WWF defines itself as a science-based, nonpartisan civil society organization and carries out initiatives with several trusts focused on geographical areas or topics, mostly with a top-down approach and also lobbying governments and investment industry to re-direct financial flows away from fossil fuels. WWF-SA formed a partnership with the South African Climate Action Network (SACAN) and the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ) to carry out the EU-funded project *Climate Action to Accountability*.

Projects

WWF-SA identified several issues to be tackled to improve South African climate governance: first of all, South African social justice activism has little influence over national environmental policy, with only a small number of NGOs and academics working in the field, a fragmented and inadequately capacitated civil society, weak policy ambition, implementation and accountability. Secondly, the government's limited attention to the human rights, equity and gender dimensions of climate change. Thirdly, a scarcely capacitated youth. Moreover, although South Africa has a lively civil society, just a fraction if it dedicates its energies to climate action. In this vein, the *Climate Ambition to Accountability Project* (CAAP). is an attempt to boost those efforts and spark debate on South Africa's climate policy.

As a general objective, this project aims at enhancing South African climate ambition. In this vein, WWF SA, in collaboration with SACAN and the IEJ, aim at working for enhancing the capacity of South African CSOs, to become key players in the South African climate governance, with a special focus on youth participation.

Surplus People Project (SPP)

SPP was established in 1980 as a national research project that publicized and supported communities in their struggles against the apartheid state's forced removals. In the post-apartheid era, SPP's focus shifted to support community struggles for agrarian transformation, including food sovereignty, equitable land ownership and alternatives to dominant models of production. Since 2005, SPP's focus is on food sovereignty and agroecology and on people's collective power, as SPP believes that social mobilization and movement building are the only ways for advancing change from below and to advance land and agrarian transformation. The SPP works in the Northern and Western Cape Provinces and chose a local approach to be embedded in the specific context where they work. SPP is also part of the Tshintsha Amakhaya network, together with AFRA, and la Via Campesina. SPP is very careful when it comes to funders, only accepting money from organizations with whom they share a commonality of principles. These organizations include especially foundations, FBOs, but also bilateral funds.

Projects

The project under analysis is a follow-up of a previous project funded by BfdW and is named *“realizing pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty and the improvement of livelihoods”*. The project takes place in the in the Western Cape and Northern Cape and is funded from 2020 to 2023. Similarly to AFRA, SPP focuses on the rights of farmers, farmworkers and forestry communities, for them to be empowered to claim their land and resources, to improve agroecological production at the local and provincial level, and to advocate movement building in the hands of women and youth. The aim of this project is thus promoting an agro-ecological local value chain, that contributes both to local communities' food sovereignty and to the fight against climate change. The primary target group are some organized groups of farmers and producers, as well as farmers and forestry dwellers and communities engaged in land tenure reform struggles. A secondary target are the officials of government departments and institutions and other key players in the land and food activities. Indeed, SPP reckons that there are no adequate investments nor a conducive environment at the policy level to

advance an agro-ecological value chain in South Africa. In addition, farmworkers live on privately owned land, have no access to services or infrastructure because the land is not theirs, and sometimes have issues related to access to basic services, while a diffused patriarchal system hinders women empowerment.

SPP's agroecology mission foresees training and adaptation to farmers in the long run, for ten years, assisting communities to access land to grow their own crops, facilitate peer learning among groups, to share skills and knowledge, and regular quarterly meetings with agroecology working groups. The objective is to make agroecology recognized as a sustainable alternative to industrial agriculture and create awareness of agroecology as a climate mitigation measure both among farmers and relevant government departments. Another aim is for farmworkers to be able to know and claim their human and constitutional rights to improve their working and living conditions. So, SPP organizes workshops on political education and rights, peer learning and solidarity exchanges, supports local planning and organizing, and if it is the case, collective actions. Although SPP oversees the organization and facilitates joint campaigns with partners, to jointly address the challenges of commonage land, it is farmers that lead the processes, and specific sessions are dedicated to youth and women.

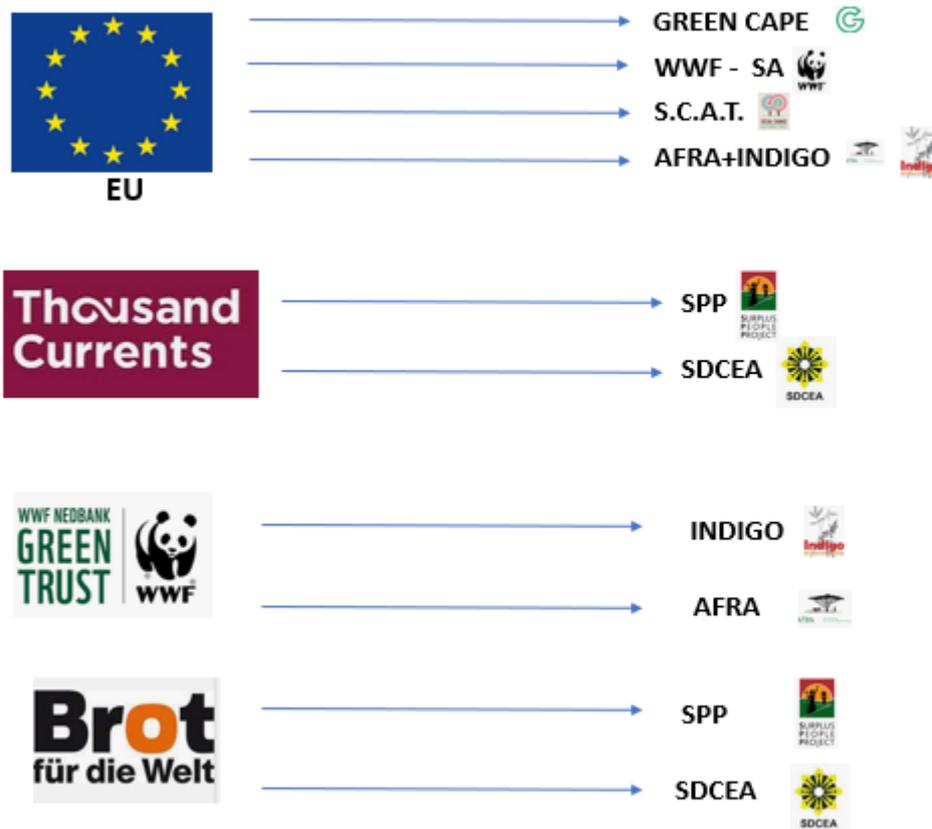
South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA)

Finally, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) is an environmental justice organization based in South Durban and founded in 1995. SDCEA is a structured network of nineteen organizations, that provide the structure through which the local CSOs promote their action for EJ. SDCEA struggles are about clean air, water and soil and for the alleviation of environmental racism and poverty. SDCEA also carries out lobbying, reporting and research on industrial incidents and accidents in the heavily industrialized South Durban area.

As a result of the city's administration during Apartheid, which located black workers close to the industries where they worked, the South Durban Basin area on the eastern coast of South Africa hosts both a huge petrochemical industry and a lively and a highly active community. The presence of industries so close to a residential area resulted in abnormal high rates of respiratory problems and

cancer among residents (Aylett 2010b). SDCEA translates the communities' claims into technical demands, thanks to the expertise they can mobilize and work with larger environmental movements to measure and reduce carbon emissions. In this vein, SDCEA carries out several campaigns that relate to community empowerment, pollution and health, infrastructure and development, energy and climate change and strategic litigations. Similarly to SPP, SDCEA pays a particular attention to the origins of their funding, and chose not to accept government funds. Among funders, there are BfdW and TC.

Table 2 outlines the relationships between donors and NGOs



2. Methodology and Methods

As explained in the previous chapters, in this study I mostly look at the participation dimension of environmental justice, that nonetheless is closely linked to the other dimensions. We have seen in chapter 1 that environmental justice comprises dimensions of distributive justice, recognition, procedural justice, and community capabilities (Schlosberg 2004; Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020), and that the elements that constitute environmental justice are deeply interrelated and interdependent. For example, unfair decision-making processes are unlikely to promote the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens (Bell and Carrick 2017) and the way material and non-material resources are distributed differentiates people's capacities to participate in the processes affecting their environment and access to natural resources (Schlosberg 2007). Procedural justice cannot exist without recognition, and distributive justice cannot exist without procedural justice. For this reason, while investigating the influence of donors on NGOs' efforts on the participation of local communities in environmental projects I keep in mind the interrelatedness of the justice dimensions of the environmental justice paradigm.

Moving to how this analysis is conducted in practice, I selected as case studies donor organizations with different organizational structures, sizes, principles, cultural backgrounds and accountability mechanisms, assuming that this diversity would generate different understandings of local community participation. In other words, donors construct the meaning of local community participation in different ways, and I expect this to be reflected in the rules and conditions that regulate their relationships with NGOs. These rules thus contain evidence of the donors' social construction of meanings related to environmental justice.

To allow a clearer understanding of the nature of the phenomena I am investigating, and the type of knowledge I can produce by analyzing these donors' rules and conditions, I now turn to a discussion of the philosophical standpoints adopted in the context of this work.

2.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

As outlined in the former paragraph, in light of their organizational differences, donors construct the meaning of environmental justice in different ways, be it explicitly stated or implied in their provisions and manifested in their relationships with the NGOs they fund. This work thus rests on the assumptions that reality is to be researched through the meaning that is given to it, and that donor organizations, as social actors, carry situated understandings of the contexts in which they are embedded (Grant et al. 2004). The assumption that knowledge is situated and contextual and thus meaning is contingent, corresponds to an interpretivist philosophical approach to research. In other words, multiple realities exist and they are constructed by individuals and organizations who create and review the meanings of social phenomena in social interaction (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 13). In this vein, relationships are researched, rather than the individual subject or organization (Bryman 2012).

Indeed, the key concepts of this research, such as development, participation and justice are based on inter-organizational relationships, and are contested notions. Their study require a critical research approach that emphasizes how meanings are constructed within relationships that involve inequities and power (Sapkota 2019). That being said, a reflection on what can be considered knowledge is now necessary.

In a research context where clear power asymmetries are in place, the systems of knowledge of powerful actors can be attributed hegemonic meaning. Following Malavisi (2018, 41):

“One of the fundamental problems of development theory and practice is grounded in the limitations of theoretical discussions of knowledge, and how this knowledge is then applied in the practice. Development depends on knowledge. Understanding what development is relies on knowledge; decisions about development policies and programs are based on a certain knowledge; often the knowledge of some can be deemed to have a higher epistemic authority and, hence, credibility than the knowledge of others”.

Following this, uncovering the processes of meaning construction of powerful actors, and the appreciation of the importance of context and the situatedness of the research subjects are crucial for understanding the challenges that arise in development, and has an emancipatory function for the situated knowledge of less powerful actors involved in the relationships, in this case environmental projects. In this vein, I adopt a constructivist epistemology which maintains that knowledge and reality cannot be discovered but are rather constructed by various social actors and processes or meanings uncovered by social scientists.

Santos (2015) claims that within epistemological debates, the dimension of power is not often discussed, and Malavisi (2018) endorses him, by claiming that knowledge is exactly where the power “begins”. Indeed, generally, the scientific knowledge of powerful development actors bears a specific, often western, worldview, but at the same time claims to represent a universal reality and explanation. Of course, the argument here is not that the “science is not true”, but that it cannot ignore the specificities of different social and political contexts and the knowledge they produce. Indeed, relying on a single type of knowledge recalls unequal types of relations that develop into the colonial, and reduces the possibilities of alternatives or complementary articulations of knowledge (Malavisi 2018).

The main problem addressed by this thesis is that in the development field, donors have power because of resource-dependency dynamics, and, with relation to donor-NGO relationships, the production of knowledge is mostly confined to (global) institutions that disburse funds (Ojha 2013), giving rise to NGOization dynamics. The type of knowledge that is credited and legitimized by each one of them, however, is not necessarily corresponding to the reality of local communities in the Global South and the NGOs that represent them.

In light of this, relations between donors and NGOs constitute a space where power relations materialize and where donors hold power: as creators of these spaces, donors set the rules, and the documents that contain these rules are the space where this power — that can be visible, hidden or invisible —, materializes in the form of provisions. By valuing some types of knowledge over others, donors shape these provisions through their power over NGOs. This epistemological injustice can

nurture NGOization dynamics, thus hindering NGOs' work towards environmental justice. The knowledge of donors' situated understanding of environmental justice thus resides in the artefacts that shape their relationships with NGOs and that contain evidence of how donors construct its meaning.

These patterns of power can be described as colonial as they redefine culture, labor, common sense, knowledge and aspiration of the self in ways that accredit superiority to the colonizers (Makuwira 2018). Malavisi (2018, 44) refers this as a north – south confrontation between those who control and those who depend, where northern actors (NGOs or donors) give the funds but maintain their distance, thus creating a power relation. A post-colonial lens can thus be used to examine the reproduction of colonial relationships through donor-NGO relations, taking donors' provisions that NGOs must abide by as the means by which power is perpetuated and through which conceptions of truth and reality become established.

Following Sakue-Collins (2021), postcolonialism is a broad commentary on present models of politics, economy and ethics used as a critical lens to research the obstacles to self-determination, among which the dominant models of development, that are also perpetuated by donor organizations. Post-colonial thinkers argue that the concept and practice of development reflects a Western worldview that propagates hegemonic practices over the rest of the world. So, post-development is a departure from an imposed development practice that disregards local knowledge (Makuwira 2018; Escobar 1992). As donors' rules are the reification of this hegemony, and thus become the reification of the supposed superiority of donors' knowledge over local NGOs, it seemed reasonable to employ them as the bulk of my data.

In particular, in this thesis I refer to the imposition of meaning via donors' rationales for funding, the accessibility of donors' funds and to whom they are accessible, the use of funds that NGOs are allowed to make and monitoring and evaluation practices. By the means of these practices, I assume that there is, at least to some degree, epistemological injustice perpetuated by donors. Epistemological injustices also have the consequence of producing procedural injustice, as explicated in the environmental justice paradigm.

In this vein, in order to fight these power relations, we should not rely only on Western thought or consider it as a universal truth, but on the contrary, make the knowledges of others visible. However, for what concerns donor-NGO relationships, this is far from being reached. For example, Global development programs and policies devised within large multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, UN, and others are epistemically dependent on types of knowledge that have led to injustices (Malavisi 2018).

As anticipated, the power exercised by donors on NGOs can have different characteristics, and to delve into it, I take inspiration from the power cube, explained in next section.

2.2 Methodological approach

Analyzing power

The previous section has shown that power asymmetries between donors and NGOs are at the heart of the relationships under analysis. To make sense of it, I turn to Gaventa (2006) who, to understand power in development, offer a practical approach to confront its complexity.

Any work about NGOs engaged in and committed to community participation, and the constraints they must face because of resource dependency dynamics, necessitates a discussion of *empowerment's* root-concept, *power*. Gaventa and Cornwall (2001) frame participation as *spaces* that can be more or less inclusive and maintain that participation is shaped by power relations between more and less powerful actors. These spaces for participation are “moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies and discourses that affect their lives and interests, which are shaped by power relations, which in turn shape the boundaries of participatory spaces” (21).

The donor organizations that constitute the case studies of this research hold power over NGOs and create the spaces within which NGOs can participate and operate. Donors' rationales for funding, the rules and conditions for accessing and using funds, together with accountability requirements, represent the space created by donors and in which donors hold power.

To analyze the power relations between donors and NGOs, I borrowed some concepts from Gaventa's *power cube* and adapted them to the needs of my research (Gaventa 2006), inspired by other researchers who have taken inspiration from the power cube analytical framework to suit their needs. For example, Wood et al. (2016) adapted the power cube to consider procedural justice spaces, rather than participatory spaces, specifically within the framework of climate-compatible development projects.

Bringing together Lukes' (2005) three dimensions of power, the power cube seeks to investigate multiple manifestations of power and to uncover its relational and spatial modalities, by "focusing on notions such as inclusion/exclusion, invitation, accessibility and representation" (Westerveld 2021, 96). It is thus a sound analytical tool in the case of an inter-organizational study on participation

Gaventa interprets power as forms (visible, hidden, invisible) and spaces (invited, claimed and closed), combined with a spatial component (local, national, global). For the *visibility* of power, three dimensions are present: the *visible* power is the observable decision-making, with formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures. So, donors' rules and conditions for accessing funds are an expression of visible power. Hidden power concerns "who" can make decisions about "what", so it refers to who dictates the agenda. This form of power thus concerns donors' rationales for funding and the accessibility of funds. Invisible power is exerted when stakeholders influence the belief systems of others, which include considerations of who is worthy of recognition and participatory opportunities.

For the *spaces* of power, Gaventa claims that relations shape the boundaries of participatory spaces, what is possible within them, and who may enter, with which identities, discourses and interests. Asking ourselves how these spaces were created, with whose interests and with what terms of engagement, it is possible to identify three main types of spaces. Within closed spaces, decisions are made by powerful actors behind closed doors. Invited spaces are those into which people are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organizations. Finally, there are the spaces which are claimed by less powerful actors from or against more powerful actors, or created more autonomously by them. Cornwall (2002) refers to these spaces as spaces which emerge out of sets of common concerns or identifications and may

come into being as a result of popular mobilization. Finally, much of the work on public spaces for participation involves the contest between local, national and global arenas as locations of power.

For the scope of my research, I make use of the dimension of the visibility of power to understand in what form power materializes in donor-NGO relationships and whether and how it gives rise to NGOization dynamics as discussed in chapter 1. Within the context of my research, visible power has to do with the explicit rules and conditions for accessing, using and monitoring funds. Also, whether NGOs can engage with visible decision-making processes or not connects with powerful people and institutions controlling what issues are on the agenda. Finally, invisible power is exerted when powerful stakeholders influence the belief systems of others, which includes considerations of who is worthy of recognition and opportunities. In the context of my research, invisible power manifests through professionalization dynamics, whereby donors value and grant opportunities to specific kinds of knowledge and capabilities —mostly western and managerialist— over other types of situated systems of knowledge. Moreover, internationally driven, “expert” knowledge and Western science are also privileged in the design of project guidelines, while, as explained in chapter 1, “expert” knowledge is imported from abroad and unsuitable within local contexts (Wood et al. 2016).

I do not analyze the spatial dimension and the type of space indicated in the power cube, as there is no variety in this dimension in the cases taken into analysis, and it only might cause confusion without adding any value to the analysis. Donors’ spaces for participation are basically closed, as in the spaces under analysis —the relationships between NGOs and donors— NGOs are not recognized as legitimate actors as rules are made without their input.

As seen in the former paragraph, donors generally perpetrate neocolonial stances towards NGOs, in the form of imposition of western knowledge and worldviews, which has contributed to cause NGOization dynamics (Choudry 2010). In this vein I have hypothesized that in the space that they create, they yield forms of visible power (through the rules they put on funds), hidden power, by setting and perpetrating an agenda to which NGOs must conform, and finally invisible power, through the professionalization required. Having established that by the means of their power over NGOs donors can shape NGOs’ actions and practices, and consequently that that NGOs’ opportunities and hindrances

regarding their efforts towards local community participation largely derive from donors, I now turn to the researchable problem at the core of this research.

2.3 Researchable problem

In order to assess the conditions that help local NGOs' contributions to (good) environmental governance on the one hand, and their influence for realizing social and political change underpinned by environmental justice on the other, it is important not only to investigate NGOs as organizations but also to investigate the context in which they operate and the relations that shape their work. Indeed, NGOs do not operate in a vacuum but within physical, political, social contexts that shape their goals, strategies and activities. This implies "consideration of the organizational imperatives they face and what they actually do and [...] the alignment between values and activities" (Berny and Rootes 2018, 962). To date, much work on NGOs in the environmental field is normative rather than descriptive or analytical, so it falls short of analyzing the constraints and influences that NGOs face and how these influences shape NGOs goals, structures and activities (Markham and Fonjong 2016). As seen in previous paragraphs, donors are a key constraint in this sense.

It is important to point out that, although donors have the power to decide how NGOs are allowed to use the funds they are granted, and through their funding allocation strategies have the power to decide whether to value NGOs for their professionalism or closeness to local communities and knowledge of the context, participatory spaces and the power that donors exercise within them do not always remain unchallenged.

Indeed, in line with a constructivist epistemology, meanings are constantly contested, reproduced and adjusted (Schwandt 1994) . In this vein, AbouAssi and Trent (2016) and Ketola (2016) show how NGOs can put in place a number of strategies to cope with, and sometimes resist and influence donor-led agendas. However, NGOs' agency falls beyond the scope of my research, as my

aim is to find out how donors, through their rules and conditions, facilitate or hinder NGOs in their endeavor to uphold or strengthen participation of local communities in environmental projects.

The bulk of the literature on NGOization fails to systematically address donor-NGO relationships, although it is seen as important. Moreover, to my knowledge, the literature on civil society does not provide comparative studies about donors, besides comparisons between bilateral and multilateral donor organizations (see Gulrajani 2016; Biscaye, Reynolds, and Anderson 2017).

I thus focus my research on donors, always with a view to learn more about donors' rules as the expression of the epistemological hegemony of powerful development actors, and that can shape NGOs work in two broad directions: either perpetrating NGOization dynamics or facilitating practices that trust grassroots stakeholders with decision-making power.

In this vein, mindful of donors' power over NGOs, I take donors and donors' conditions as possible vehicles for either NGOization, in the form of professionalization, projectization and the bureaucratization of social and environmental change from below or, conversely, as challenging NGOization dynamics, thus facilitating the conditions for NGOs to promote local community participation.

Mindful that the extent to which donors' provisions facilitate or hinder NGOs' efforts towards local community participation move on a continuum rather than being dichotomous, and with a view to fill the gaps in research about donors' rules (or their absence) as the manifestation of donors' power over NGOs I ask:

- What specific donors' rules and conditions facilitate or hinder NGOs in fostering local communities' participation in environmental projects?
- How do the rules and conditions of different types of donors shape NGOs' efforts towards the local communities' participation in environmental projects?

2.4 Positionality and reflexivity

Researching issues of power, although not on the ground, can create tensions at multiple levels, as there always is an interplay between the researcher and the object of study. For this reason, it is important to be aware of one's role and how it may affect the people and the organizations that are being studied, but also how, in turn, they influence the researcher and the research process.

A number of problems related to positionality have been attached to the study of NGOs and related actors. These include, for instance, the normativity and positionality of the researchers and a possible inclination to idealize the role of NGOs in development, as many authors tend to romanticize the possibilities of NGOs to make a difference in development. The criticism concerning positionality emerges from the fact that many NGO researchers have been not only academic authors, but also volunteers and professionals who work for NGOs themselves (Brass et al. 2018). Although the double status of researcher-NGO professional gives them an insider view, it may also cause bias. To my knowledge, this criticism does not apply to studies on donors, as authors that write about donor organizations are generally not professionals that work from donor organizations themselves.

Positionality is integral to the process of qualitative research, as it illustrates an individual's worldview and the position they adopt about a research task (Holmes 2020). Positionality therefore acknowledges and recognizes that researchers are part of the social world that they are investigating and therefore, subject to interpretations. Therefore, the first aspect to recognize in a positionality statement is that we can never objectively describe reality, no matter the ontological position taken (Dubois 2015).

A positionality statement requires first of all locating themselves about the subject, i.e., acknowledging personal positions that have the potential to influence the research, and secondly, locating themselves about the participants, i.e., individually consider how a researcher views herself, how others view them, and reflect on the position about the participants in the project, generally as an insider or an outsider. Finally, a positionality statement requires an explanation as to how, where, when

and in what way the research project context might or have influenced the research process (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

I am a woman in her thirties, born and raised in northern Italy. My academic background is in modern languages and literature and international relations, and my interest in this field grew as my research project took shape. Although I sympathize with global and local environmental justice struggles, I have no working experience neither in the development world nor in environmental governance, and I have no significant history as an activist. For this reason, I consider my background not to significantly influence the outcomes of my research.

While involved in my original research plan (see annex 4), being an outsider to the South African environmental and development community made me painfully aware of the inadequacy of my means to properly carry out this research. I hoped to develop the sensitivity and knowledge necessary to carry out this research through an intensive fieldwork, which also included an internship in one of the NGOs that was supposed to be one of my case studies. Indeed, doing research on development actors, while not being a development professional, might be considered reckless, as I only had a shallow knowledge of development dynamics when I embarked in this project, I had no prior connection with the NGOs that were going to be my case studies, and I never set foot in South Africa before. Moreover, as a result of the changes in the project rendered necessary by the COVID emergency, I found myself working on new project that was built rather tentatively. All these aspects made me feel like an impostor about the validity and relevance of this work.

Being an outsider posed significant accessibility problems and numerous refusals and unanswered emails from donors and NGOs, and sometimes I managed to schedule an interview only out of insistence along with lengthy explanations of who I was and why I was interested in them.

However, being an external observer saved me the most common shortcomings derived from having the double status of NGO professional/activist and researcher, that is a presumed lack of “detachment”, the need to switching one’s role from NGO activist to researcher, or having to shift and renegotiate one’s positionality on a daily basis (Westerveld 2021).

The fact that I was a total outsider was found unusual by interviewees, a fact has probably compromised my ability to have more in depth conversations with interviewees or to identify with them, or them with me.

My perception was also that interviewees saw me as an outsider and found it odd that an Italian researcher that was not previously introduced to them by anyone should (remotely) study their specific project or relationship with donors or grantees. Of the people I have interviewed, only a few of them demonstrated a genuine interest in my research project, while others limited themselves to answering to my questions. However, both interviews with donors, mostly in Europe and North America, and with NGOs professionals based in South Africa were carried out during critical phases of the pandemic (January-February 2021 for the former and June-September 2021 for the latter). It follows that it was a stressful period for everyone, both NGOs and donors were facing unprecedented challenges, and this might have limited their time to devote to me or their interest to in my study.

As for the analysis of the texts, I tried to approach documents not in a vacuum, but in the awareness that my interpretation is always shaped by my individual social and cultural contexts, from my specific standpoint, and that consequently, research as an objective process is a utopia, no matter the ontological starting point.

As an educated woman, but who approached this kind of text for the first time, it was not always easy to perform this analysis, finding them utterly repetitive, technical and full of buzzwords. Where possible, I asked the interviewees about their own perceptions of the texts under analysis, to reduce my bias. The first reading was useful for having an overview of the texts, and developing a codebook allowed me to focus on specific bits of text, while I remained aware of the overall context.

An interpretation of text /interview (concerning the South African development context in this case) calls for knowledge of the other culture and society being studied, in order to be able to ask what other meanings the text might contain besides those which derive from my culturally biased perspective, and I tried to make up for this by learning as much as possible about the national context, but also the

local context in which the projects took place, both from interviewees and by engaging with relevant literature.

2.5 Data

2.5.1 Documentation

The documentation I collected from donors' and NGOs' websites, or kindly provided by donors and NGOs, represent, in written form, the power held by donors over NGOs, that manifests itself as visible, hidden and invisible power, that contributes to NGOization dynamics that are carriers of postcolonial practices, and that shape NGOs' work with local communities.

Generally, project guidelines define the rules that NGOs must follow for entering these spaces, thus revealing visible power dynamics, while NGOs' (successful) projects proposals represent their compliance with these rules.

Monitoring and evaluation guidelines and NGOs' reports and evaluations define the rules that NGOs must follow for keeping their place in these spaces. Websites and blog articles provide both the context in which stakeholders operate, and deeper insights into their values and agendas.

The language used in the documentation and the activities prescribed — such as for example consistent and systematic financial and narrative monitoring and evaluation— reveal the level of professionalization required from NGOs, as explained in section 2.2, as a form of invisible power. Most documents are instances of a professional speech genre that requires knowledge of a certain style and way of expressing things, including prioritized key words that derive from international development discourses. Finally, the whole of the documentation reveals sometimes explicitly, sometime implicitly, the agenda of the donor, that NGOs should help realize (hidden power). Documents thus represent the written, material embodiment of these three dimensions of power perpetuated by donor over NGOs in line with the epistemological stance expressed in section 2.1.

The most recent documentation was collected for each donor as regards calls for grants, guidelines, reports, contracts and webpages. As for the NGOs, the written material I gathered varies in

nature and length and the main bulk of documentation is represented by NGOs annual reports, blog articles, and project summaries. In two cases, I was able to remotely observe the project launches conferences and thus I was able to collect additional data and contacts. Some of the NGOs also agreed to share proposals and reports of current or past projects. This was more common with organizations with recently submitted project proposals or that had recently concluded a project. The content of the documents was then analyzed following the codebook presented in detail in the next section, using the software NVivo.

Table 3 lists the donors' documentation used in the analysis

Donor	Document
<i>EU</i>	Guideline for grant applicant
	FAQ
	Grant application form – Full application
	Logical Framework Matrix
<i>CEPF</i>	CEPF Operational Manual
	Financial requirements management (web page)
	Monitoring and Evaluation guidelines (web page)
	Safeguard Policies
<i>Green Trust</i>	Strategic Framework
	Application guidelines
	Funding application form
<i>BfdW</i>	Website
	Criteria for evaluation of development assistance
	Strategic priorities
	Evaluation guidelines (web page)
	Project Cycle guidelines (web page)
	Financial support (web page)
	Religion and development (web page)
Our partners (web page)	
<i>TC</i>	Annual report (2019)
	Strategy
	Our model (web page)
	What if foundations... (blog article)
	Formerly IDEX (web page)
	Learning and evaluation section (web page)
Evaluation and learning report	

Table 4 lists the NGOs' documentation used in the analysis

NGO	Document
<i>AFRA</i>	2020 Annual report
	Application for financial support (BfdW)
	Grant application form – Full application (EU)
	Project Launch (EU)
<i>INDIGO</i>	Mid-Term report (Green Trust)
	Project submission for approval (Green Trust)
<i>GREEN CAPE</i>	Project Summary (EU)
	Project Launch (EU)
	Request for Proposal: project visual identity (EU)
	Request for quotation (M&E) (EU)
<i>SCAT</i>	Annual report (2020)
	Grant application form – Full application (EU)
	Project summary (EU)
<i>WWF SA</i>	Project summary (EU)
	Project website (EU)
	Project Launch (EU)
<i>SPP</i>	Annual report (2020)
	Project application (BfdW)
	Mid-term report (BfdW)
<i>SDCEA</i>	Reports and blog articles on SDCEA website (not much related to donors)

2.5.2 Semi-structured interviews

The content analysis of the documentation provided a sound corpus of data that is to be considered the bulk of the data of this thesis, and the main source of findings. However, I found it important to triangulate the findings emerged from it by conducting semi structured interviews with both donor organizations and NGOs professionals, in order to clarify doubts, deepen findings, and to see whether interviews challenged or confirmed the findings of the documentations (there are instances of the two cases). In this vein, while I was performing the content analysis of the documents, I contacted donor representatives (mainly program managers) and performed semi-structured interviews. Unfortunately, only one interviewee was available for each donor. Three of the five interviews were

performed via zoom, one by telephone and one by email exchange. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed.

As for the interviews to NGOs, they were designed to further challenge or confirm the results emerged from the analysis of donors' material. Indeed, they were performed once the analysis of donors' documentation and interviews was concluded, when I had gained a sound knowledge of my case studies.

I usually contacted the director of the organization, or the person in charge of the specific project I was interested in; after one or more follow-up emails I was usually able to get a zoom interview, except for a few cases. In two cases, I was able to interview more than one person that worked in the organization, specifically in cases where the organization had been working with more than one of the donors in my sample, and different people oversaw different projects.

Both in the context of donors and NGOs interviews, I introduced myself as a PhD candidate eager to learn more about their organization and tried to create an informal atmosphere by asking general questions for breaking the ice, while showing interest for the information disclosed. In some cases, the interviewees had asked me to be provided with a list of questions I was willing to ask before the interview, so that they could reflect on their answers. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule, that covered the main categories identified in the content analysis (see annex 2) but often went "off-track", as donors and NGO practitioners, depending on their position, expertise, the stage the project was at, or simply their time availability, were willing to share on specific aspects of project processes or specific topics. The list of the interviews can be found in annex 1.

In my study, informed consent was gained by starting each interview with an explanation of my research and asking for the consent of the interviewee. I also explained the process of data management, which included recording the interviews, transcribing them, and storing them safely.

During the write-up, I relistened to recordings whilst choosing participant citations, so that the coding process could cohabit with the meaning-making process. With their consent, the position that

interviewees hold/held in the organization was revealed, along with the name of the organization, but not their names and surnames, as that would not have added any value to my work.

2.6 Methods

Following Coffey (2014), documents are literary, textual or visual devices that gather information and enable it to be shared and presented. All documents are created for a given purpose and to serve a function. It is indeed their function, their social production and their consumption that give documents relevance for analysis. With this in mind, we can approach the analysis of documents for what they are, and for what they are used to accomplish. We thus need to understand documents as products with a specific purpose: as explained in section 2.5, this research interprets the documents that contain donors' rules and conditions as the product of donors' epistemological stances about local community participation, and that vehicle donors' power over NGOs, through which meaning is constructed and contested.

Fairclough (2003) claims that there is no single school of textual analysis but rather a variety of approaches to texts as objects of analysis, and that texts are to be understood in a broad sense (to the extent that transcripts of interviews are also texts). A possible method to study documents would be approaching them in terms of the frequency of specific words, phrases or other elements or characteristics. This would not suit my study, as frequency does not appear so relevant for analyzing the power dynamics that these documents convey. For example, the concept of *innovation* appears several times in various documents of the same donor; however, the frequency of appearance of concepts is, if anything, only accessory in explaining their relevance. What tell us about what innovation means for donor-NGO relationships is the context in which this concept is embedded, and the meaning that donors attach to it. This is can only be uncovered by performing a qualitative analysis. Moreover, as I explain in section 2.5, the number of documents collected for each donor is highly uneven, and so, an analysis based on "word frequency" would not have generated valid results.

Finally, on a linguistic note, official or public reports, as well as web pages, are written in a language that differs from the everyday, spoken, language use, especially in the development field. However, I did not have access to non-official sources, and so a comparison between “development” language used for official reports, and presumably communications with donors, and everyday language was not possible to perform.

Documents are resources to be mined from various angles, and so I chose to perform a qualitative content analysis, and index and code data to identify key themes, identify patterns, and generate categories.

2.6.1 Qualitative Content analysis

Donors’ documentation and interview transcripts were analyzed through a qualitative content analysis technique. Content analysis is described as a method to classify written or oral materials into identified categories of similar meanings (Moretti et al. 2011). The epistemological basis of qualitative content analysis is that data and interpretation during the analysis phase are a co-creation of the researchers and the text, and that a text is assumed to imply more than one single meaning (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). The early definition of content analysis shows that it started as a quantitative research method, as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson 1952). The quantitative approach in content analysis breaks text into quantifiable units to analyze, and this can have the consequence of simplifying and/or distorting meaning (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). For this reason, a qualitative approach to content analysis, in which meanings and insights are gained more holistically from the text has begun to be advocated by scholars. By applying a systematic category system use, qualitative content analysis was gradually developed as opposed to quantitative content analysis (Mayring 2021). Schreier (2012) argues that qualitative content analysis is suitable for data that require some degree of interpretation. Qualitative content analysis can thus be described as “a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of

coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278) and “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material” (Schreier 2014, 1).

As anticipated, for what concerns donors, the body of documents I analyzed is composed of twenty-six documents, including guidelines for grant applications, safeguards policies, sections from operational manuals, web pages containing relevant information, and blog articles. This content analysis was performed with the help of the NVivo software²¹. It is a cross-sectional analysis, as it examines a given phenomenon at the present time (the body of documents I examine are dated from 2012-2021).

In terms of interpretation, in qualitative content analysis the manifest content —the content close to the text— can be seen as a phenomenological description, whereas more latent content can be seen as a hermeneutic interpretation. Indeed, in addition to the flexibility in using inductive or deductive approaches or a combination of both in data analysis, a second characteristic of the content analysis method is the ability for the researcher to both extract manifest and latent content meaning (Cho and Lee 2014).

Qualitative content analysis is frequently employed by using a consistent set of codes to organize text with similar content. Overall, the process of data analysis requires selecting the unit of analysis, creating categories, and creating relevant codes for each category (Schreier 2014).

The researcher often begins the analysis by sorting the coded manifest content into categories, and continues to search for the latent content (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). The heading of a category describes the content on a manifest level, with a low degree of interpretation (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). The researcher thus identifies categories and define groups of codes that share common characteristics, in order to compare and contrast them with other categories, to divide them into smaller subcategories, or to pool them into broader categories.

²¹ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package. NVivo helps qualitative researchers to organize, analyze and find insights in unstructured or qualitative data like interviews, open-ended survey responses, journal articles, social media and web content, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required.

Indeed, qualitative content analysis is category-based, which is a distinguishing feature of this method. Categories refer to aspects within the text, which put their meaning in a nutshell. The analysis of the text is, therefore, restricted to the selected category system (Mayring 2021).

The first step of my analysis was a close, systematic reading of the documents, in order to identify the parts of the documents that were useful for my research. This step constituted a qualitative overview of the documentation, which allowed me to map out what kind of information was present and what was missing for each donor and each document (Coffey 2014).

My selected unit of analysis is the single “concept” or “conveyed idea”, which allows me for variation in sentences and paragraphs. I performed my categories construction by employing classifications that correspond to different “phases” of the relationship between donors and NGOs during a project: eligibility (before), use of funds (during) M&E (during and after). In addition, I created two other categories that contain the codes that had to do with the rationale for disburse funding for specific NGOs, (guiding principles) and finally, another category where I gathered all the codes that had to do, broadly, with the relationship between donors and NGOs (donor- NGOs relationships).

When the content of documents or sentences in the documents or in interviews transcriptions matches with one of the categories from the theory, they are placed underneath one of the categories (see codebook in annex 1), under the relevant code.

For example: the sentence “*We know this may feel like a lot, but don't panic*” from the CEPF’s “Managing your grants’ financial requirements” webpage was placed under the code “recognition of power differentials” as it indicates that the donor recognizes that its reporting requirements are overly burdensome for some NGOs. This code does not explicitly concern eligibility or monitoring and evaluation for example; rather, it is an instance of how donors relate to NGOs, and so it was placed in the “NGOs-donor relationships” category.

The sentence: *the call [...] encourages innovative partnerships with the double objective of leaving no-one behind and leveraging the strengths of different stakeholders* from the “EU guidelines for Grant Applicants” was placed under the “innovation” code, as being innovative was identified as an important aspect for NGOs to

enter the space created by donors, and it indicates what innovation looks like for this specific donor. Being innovative is a criterion for being selected for receiving grants, so it was placed under the “eligibility” category.

On paper, the key difference between a deductive and an inductive approach in qualitative content analysis is about how codes are developed. An inductive approach is appropriate when prior knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation is absent, or, if existent, is limited or fragmented. When using an inductive approach, codes are dictated by the data, whereas the deductive approach starts with pre-established codes or categories derived from prior relevant theory and literature. The deductive approach is thus appropriate when the objective of the study is to test existing theory or retest existing data in a new context (Neuendorf 2017). However, sometimes the distinction between “inductive” and “deductive” approaches is not so clear-cut. Indeed, Armat et al. (2018) point out quite clearly that “inductive” and “deductive” are quite ambiguous labels in qualitative content analysis. When performing an inductive qualitative analysis, driven by data, the researcher is supposed to search for patterns in the data without theoretical precepts. However, the researcher’s mind cannot be entirely blank, because the aims of the study and research questions guide its analysis. Armat et al. (2018) claim that this is an instance of deduction. On the other hand, researchers claim to use the deductive qualitative content analysis when some views, previous research findings, theories, or conceptual frameworks regarding the phenomenon of interest exist (Mayring 2021). The researcher begins the analysis, using the pre-existing categories drawn from the theory or previous research findings, which clearly corresponds to deduction. However, it can happen that some segments do not fit into the deductively-created categorization, and so it is possible for new codes and categories to emerge, which is an instance of induction (Armat et al. 2018).

In this vein, it is sometimes difficult to assess whether an approach is inductive or deductive, as usually the researcher moves from the data to a theoretical understanding and from the concrete and specific to the abstract and general. Hence, in qualitative content analysis, researchers usually employ both approaches. For a study such as this, that implies a back and forth between inductive and inductive approaches, an approach inspired by an abductive reasoning, moving between literature and empirical

data with a view to identifying factors that could then be used either for the analysis of other cases or for suggesting hypotheses for further deductive testing, revealed to be the best fit as a way of building initial knowledge to inform an understanding of how donors' rules shape NGOs' work in local communities.

The basic assumption for adopting an abductive approach qualitative content analysis is to be oriented towards theory-building (in my case exploring specifics sites of donors' power to see what causes NGOization dynamics or practices that are conducive for NGOs to create spaces for local community participation).

Indeed, “abduction is distinct both from deduction and induction but combines features of both types of inference. What sets abduction apart from a purely (ideal-typical) inductive form of inference is that the observed phenomenon does not contain an explanation in itself (induction), neither does it constitute a new case of an already known general rule (deduction), but is rather a combination of both (Vila-Henninger et al. 2022, 7)”. More in detail, “abduction starts with a set of theories and extends them by looking for theoretically anomalous empirical cases. Empirical observations are anomalous, novel, or surprising only based on what is already theoretically established or what is expected based on existing theories—which therefore serve as a benchmark to identify unexpected empirical observations” (Ibid.).

In the case of my study, the NGOization literature is clear in saying that NGOization dynamics are detrimental to civil society contributions to social and environmental change (known general rule), even though, NGOization processes were never applied to explain the possible determinants of environmental justice as an outcome through NGOs as intermediaries. My analysis was thus based on existing theory: NGOization processes are the result of neoliberal system perpetuated by powerful actors, among which donors. One would expect that donors would not challenge NGOization dynamics, but, then some theoretically anomalous cases show that donors can counter NGOization, at several levels (surprising observation).

To bring a more specific example, the code “recognition of power differentials” emerged inductively from the texts, from sentences that pointed in that direction. However, it does not provide an explanation in itself as for whether this causes NGOization dynamics or practices that are conducive for NGOs to create spaces for local community participation, nor it constitutes a new case of an already known general rule. Rather, text suggesting donors’ reflexivity about the power they hold are a case of surprising observation that can be linked to the claim that “recognition of power differentials between various social groups should be carefully considered [...] to ensure representation justice is achieved in decision making” (Ross et al. 2021, 1512) and thus possibly be a practice conducive to local community participation and thus, environmental justice. I stopped collecting material when no new codes occur in the data. Indeed, growing instances of the same codes occurred, but no new codes emerged, and new data tended to be redundant of data already collected.

2.6.2 Document analysis

As for the NGOs’ documentation and interviews, I chose not to conduct a formal content analysis as I did for donors’ documentation and interviews. The main purpose of this part of the research (the analysis of NGOs’ perception) was to deepen the investigation and hopefully confirm or disprove findings that emerged from the first part. I thus applied a close reading approach to the available documentation. I looked at the available material with the same categories in mind as the donors’ part, specifically: *guiding principles, eligibility, use of funds, NGOs-donor relations, monitoring and evaluation*, in order to confirm or disprove my findings, but without the rigidity of a formal content analysis. In order to triangulate my findings, I performed integrative semi-structured interviews with NGO practitioners. When applicable, a focus on a specific project carried out by a specific NGO, allowed me to have a precise and delimited experience to analyze, integrated with practical examples.

2.7 Limitations

In this chapter, I have built a sound framework for analyzing my research material. However, as every academic work, my approach has limitations. The material that I was able to gather for these organizations, was, unfortunately, widely uneven. This represents one of the main drawbacks of this research; conducting this study remotely, I could not guarantee the same quality and access to data for each organization, though it could not have been guaranteed by an extensive fieldwork either. For example, I was able to collect data from four of the five NGOs funded by the EU under the *Climate Change Champions* initiative. However, at the time of writing, the projects are just beginning, which means that while I have extensive information about eligibility criteria and the selection process, data about monitoring and evaluation are lacking.

Also, the CEPF has not been funding projects in South Africa for several years. I was able to find reports of concluded projects, but it was difficult to find NGO professionals who had worked with them to provide me with material. Wherever possible, I made up for important information gaps through interviews. In addition, the quantity and the quality of information disclosed by each organization is considered as a form of research data in itself. Another limitation is that, as an individual research project, the consistency and validity of intercoder reliability is lacking.

This work is at the intersection of development studies, as it is a context-sensitive investigation of power relations between development actors, and civil society studies, as it studies civil society actors as organizations. The field of action of the NGOs investigated in this thesis, environmental governance, was supposed to have a major relevance at the inception of this project and being involved in environmental projects was taken as a criterion for NGOs selection, in order to enhance the comparability of the case studies. However, in the end, while providing some insights on the weight of environmental priorities in NGOs agendas, and the ensuing limitations for community participation, the findings of this thesis do not provide relevant contributions to environmental governance literature. However, this work takes the procedural/participatory dimension of environmental justice as goal for NGOs, and an ideal outcome of project activities, towards which NGOs strive, and towards which

donors have the power to shape NGOs activities, and consequently their work with local communities. This thesis thus contributes to the environmental justice literature by pointing out elements that can facilitate or hinder NGOs who take environmental justice as concrete outcome. It thus explores more “remote” and, so far unexplored, obstacles or assets to environmental justice.

While South Africa provides the national context of this work, the findings of this research do not have a specific relevance for South African development and environmental policy. This is mainly due to two reasons. This project was supposed to be carried out in three years and benefit from an extended fieldwork, but due to the unexpected events outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the scope of the thesis had to be reconsidered. For this reason, I had to select a focus and a sample of cases that I could handle independently, and in a relatively short period of time. If initially I had a sample of NGOs as case studies, now donors are my case studies. NGOs are clearly embedded in the South African social and political landscape, but donors are less so, or as explained in later sections, not all of them are. South Africa was thus maintained as the context of my research in order to enhance comparability, and to provide a context with a rich and lively civil society working on environmental issues (see section 1.6). It follows that, while specificities inherent to the South African context are outlined, and when possible, investigated, I take South Africa as the context where the NGOs that receive funds from my case studies are embedded, and a country in the Global South where donors exercise power on local NGOs, giving rise to NGOization dynamics, which has consequences on NGOs’ environmental justice mission.

3. Exploring Donors' rationales for funding and recognition of power asymmetries

This first chapter explores the motivations that drive donors' choice to fund local environmental NGOs, and in what ways their funding rationales can be interpreted as an expression of donors' power over NGOs. Donors' funding rationales inform the rules of the game, that are set to be biased against certain people and issues. As such, they can be considered as an expression of hidden power (Gaventa 2021).

Before delving into donors' rationales for funding, I deemed it important to assess if and to what extent donors recognize their position of power over NGOs, as a first step to be taken to address power imbalances, and as an indicator of donors' eagerness to address NGOization dynamics. All donors recognize, more or less explicitly, the power they hold over NGOs. Some of them take action to address this, and, to some extent devolve some of this power to NGOs. TC and BfdW declare having modified some of their practices as a result of what they learned from the NGOs they fund, in order to better address their needs²². While TC has undertaken this endeavor radically, BfdW, the CEPF and the EU appear more moderate in their efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of their power over NGOs. These donors associate power asymmetries with their inaccessibility to small and grassroots organizations. However, instead of changing their rules to be more accessible, they allow professionalized organizations to fund third parties with donor funding (BfdW, EU), with the risk of making them, in turn, professionalized, and organize consultations with local CSOs to define the scope of the calls for grants, but only inviting large and professionalized organizations (EU). The CEPF appoints staff to help applicants navigate the complexity of its guidelines instead of easing the funding processes. Finally, the Green Trust recognizes and validates its power over NGOs, inviting them to actualize its agenda.

²² Interviews 2 and 4

The environmental character of the projects under analysis advanced the question of whether donors' funding rationales are based on environmental goals or on supporting people active in environmental justice initiatives. Environmental goals can sometimes take prominence over local communities' wellbeing, needs and claims. Indeed, CEPF, and the Green Trust's approach appear to sustain a projectization of environmental issues, based on a dichotomy between people and nature that takes local communities as a means to achieve environmental goals. Conversely, TC's and BfdW's approaches value local communities' needs in relation to the environment where they live, rather than or their potential to help realize environmental goals. In particular, TC funds groups active in environmental justice issues, supporting "what they are already doing" rather than requiring them to develop formal projects. Global goals such as SDGs were found to guide the funding rationales of some of the donors under analysis (EU, CEPF, BfdW), at least on paper. While other donors (TC) found this practice as directive, and to foster bureaucratization, findings suggests that it does not have tangible implications in practice.

Table 5 summarizes the findings of chapter 3

<i>Elements opposing NGOization</i>	Recognition of power differentials	Opening to change and transform as result of relationships with NGOs	Priority to communities active in environmental questions
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, EU, CEPF, TC	BfdW, TC	TC, BfdW
<i>Elements partially opposing NGOization</i>	Third-party funding (professionalization)	Consultations with local CSOs (bias towards institutionalized organizations)	Appointing staff to help applicants (instead of easing funding processes)
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, EU	EU	CEPF
<i>Elements conducive to NGOization</i>	Dichotomy people/nature	People instrumental to conservation	Imposition of agenda
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, Green Trust CEPF	CEPF, Green Trust	Green Trust

As a first step into my analysis, I reflected and reported on the rationales adopted by the donors in my sample to fund local environmental projects, and highlighted their priorities, objectives and goals.

Indeed, each one of the donors under analysis hold several reasons to fund environmental projects in the Global South, that are based on the core values of the organizations. Values define what is good, desirable, or worthwhile for an individual or an organization (Roberts, Hite, and Chorev 2014). It follows that the values and principles of donor organizations inform “what needs to be done” to tackle a given issue or set of issues.

A donor organizations’ rationale for funding is understood as those assumptions that inform their plans of action when deciding how to disburse funds. These plans, that can be more or less explicit, in turn guide their behavior, and consequently their funding rationales. I consider donor organizations’ beliefs and values —at least within my sample— as a product of Western knowledge and culture, in line with the epistemological considerations outlined in chapter 2. Donors’ funding rationales can thus be understood as an instance of hidden power, because donors have the power to including or excluding issues, framing them on the basis of their own worldview and priorities, and to set the rules of the game for NGOs to execute their agendas.

Donors’ funding rationales can indeed have an impact on NGOs that apply to receive funds, and consequently on their efforts towards local communities’ participation in environmental initiatives. Harcourt (2006) reports the difficulty for NGOs to hold to their own priorities while also carrying out donor-led projects, either because of lack of money or because of lack of time as they are caught up in fulfilling bureaucratic requirements, and points to the need to look at the political and economic environments that determine donors’ funding rationales.

Starting from the assumption that donors’ rationales for funding are embedded in their own knowledge and priorities, and that donors select NGOs based on their presumed capacity to execute environmental projects on account of their own values and priorities, this chapter investigates donors’ funding rationales as possible agent of NGOization processes, and their effects on NGOs efforts towards community participation. Indeed, donors’ funding rationales are possible harbinger of NGOization dynamics as they lay the basis for donors’ control over NGOs in the form of upward accountability mechanisms and NGOs professionalization to meet donors’ needs (Lang 2013).

It is worth recalling that in this study, community participation is understood as the possibility for local communities to have influence in terms of decision-making in donor-funded environmental projects. To that end, NGOs that implement environmental projects should convey local communities' needs and claims in project proposals or equivalent initiatives. However, this endeavor can be hindered when local communities' needs and claims, as championed by NGOs, clash with donors' priorities.

Donors' provisions can be conducive to this end, and on paper, the participation of local communities in environmental projects is considered a priority and a condition sine qua non for NGOs to receive funds (see Uddin and Belal 2019). However, sometimes, in development programs, participation is little more than a buzzword, and merely including references to community participation in donors' provisions is not sufficient to ensure actual community participation on the ground (Clifford Simplican 2019; Hussain 2020). My analysis of donors' agendas is based on the *Guiding Principles* category of the codebook and the related codes, as outlined in the methods chapter (see chapter 2). Occurrences of codes related to donors' funding rationales were mostly detected in donors' "about" web-pages and in introductory sections of documents, where they outlined their principles and missions. This category helps display the different rationales that guide how funds are disbursed, and to what type of organizations.

First of all, assuming that in the framework of a donor-funded project donors hold power over NGOs and local communities (Reith 2010; Ebrahim 2003), I aim to understand if and how this is recognized by donors. I start my analysis by focusing on statements about donors' awareness of power asymmetries, because I assume that the recognition of the unequal power dynamics that underpin the relationships between donors and local NGOs is the first step to contrasting these (Chambers and Pettit 2004). Recognizing power differentials may lead donors to acknowledge how their provisions can facilitate or hinder NGOs' work in community participation, and therefore tackle possible drawbacks. Following the exploration of donors' awareness of unequal power asymmetries between them and their grantees, I look at the presence or absence of actions taken by donors to contrast or mitigate them. I consider the recognition of unequal power dynamics, together with the actions taken to contrast them, as the most important factors that can reveal how donors' provisions shape NGOs' work for community

participation. Indeed, I consider the recognition of power asymmetries between donors and NGOs, and the actions taken to mitigate the resulting drawbacks as attempts to build donor-NGO relationships that can, at most, approach partnerships (see section 1.4).

It is worth remembering that, as many other concepts in the development field (see Hussain 2020), the term partnership is so vague and overused that it often loses its meaning. The discourse of partnership cannot be viewed separately from power, especially when considering its location within postcolonial contexts (Schöneberg 2017).

I take partnerships between donors and NGOs as an ideal to strive to, but impossible to attain, because of the power held by donors. Indeed, if partnerships cannot prescind from equality (Schöneberg 2017), an equal partnership between donors and NGOs would imply that donors and NGOs' opinions and needs have the same weight, also in building all the rules that characterize the spaces, constructed by donors, where NGOs operate (Gaventa 2006). This would mean that NGOs have a say in how funds are disbursed, the use they can make of them, accessibility to funds and accountability. Conversely, as it is clear by now, power asymmetries dominate donor-NGO relationship because of resource dependency dynamics.

The recognition of unequal power dynamics and the subsequent actions taken by donors to contrast them constitutes the basis for the analysis of the different donors' guiding principles and values that build donors' funding rationales.

After the recognition of unequal power dynamics, another element that emerged from donors' documentation that proved useful to understanding their impact on community participation is the way they define *local communities*. The way local communities are perceived by a donor can tell us about the extent to which they are recognized as agent of change or, conversely, as passive beneficiaries, and can provide insights about the value that donors attribute to them and their knowledge systems.

The donors under analysis fund projects that have an environmental character, be it for conservation purposes, sustainable agriculture, or the sustainable use of natural resources. However, different donors give environmental goals different weights. Following Mustalahti et al. (2012) and

Kothari, Camill, and Brown (2013), environmental goals can sometimes take prominence over local communities' wellbeing, needs and claims. As the focus of this work is on projects related to the environment, provisions pointing to achieving environmental goals such as biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation and adaptation and agroecology tend to prevail. However, in order for projects to foster community participation, environmental goals should be based on the specific needs of local communities and their relations with their surrounding environment. Kamill and Kothari (2013) show that the achievement of specific environmental goals can sometimes take precedence over peoples' needs and claims and impose a model of development that is incompatible with their relationship with the environment, and therefore not sustainable in the long run. Conversely, the respect and consideration of local knowledge, and the possibility for local communities to apply it in donor-funded environmental projects points to donors promoting meaningful local communities' participation and recognition. In this vein, I assess if and to what extent the different donors' agendas on *environmental goals* give space to *people*. Similarly, I consider whether any understanding of *nature* and the environment is imposed by the donor or whether cultural specificities in this sense are recognized and given value. The ways donors encourage or impose a specific understanding of nature, or conversely, the way they value local understandings of the environment and local knowledge to pursue environmental goals can tell us about donors' attention to the local context and its cultural specificities, and ultimately their willingness to delegate power to local actors.

Other elements that emerged as important for defining donors' agendas are their understanding of local civil society and of development, their attention to contributing to environmental global goals, their willingness to influence policies at the national and international level, the role of religious principles on their work and ultimately, their willingness to advocate for alternative funding models.

These elements are often intertwined, and not applicable to all of the donors in my sample. For these reasons, they are unpacked progressively in the remainder of the chapter. I now look at each of the five donors under analysis to outline their guiding principles, in order to learn about their funding rationales, and assess whether they are conveyors of NGOization processes or whether they facilitate NGOs in creating spaces for local community participation.

3.1 Brot für die Welt (BfdW)

BfdW is examined in relation to the Surplus People Project (SPP), specifically with reference to the *Realizing pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty and the improvement of livelihoods* project, and in relation to the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), with reference to the *Realizing Farm Dwellers' rights Project* (for more information about the projects, see chapter 2).

With regard to the recognition of unequal power dynamics between donors and NGOs, BfdW explicitly talks about these in their documentation. However, BfdW does not refer to donors and grantees, but rather speaks of power differentials among partners, pointing to the “conscious awareness that financial sovereignty can influence the power balance of a partnership”. BfdW also affirms the need for “partners to respect each other regardless of the power or size of the organization”²³. As explained in the introductory section, there cannot be a real partnership relation without equality, and this cannot be possible given the power dynamics underlying a relationship between a donor and an NGO. However, given the impossibility to build a real partnership, BfdW does a better job than other donor organizations in this sense; indeed, as I explain in chapter 5, by building long-term relationships with NGOs, they create favorable conditions for developing a relationship of trust, and NGOs feel legitimized to make claims to the donor, with confidence that they are going to be listened.

As BfdW’s relationships to NGOs are, at least on paper, based on shared core values with the grantees, this might suggest they favor church-based groups over NGOs. Their commitment to devoting at least a percentage of their funds to church-based organizations is indeed confirmed²⁴, and justified by the fact that church-based organizations generally have a trust relationship in place with local communities²⁵. Also BfdW’s willingness to mitigate power dynamics is based on religious beliefs, as

²³ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/en/bread-for-the-world/cooperation/our-partners/>, last access 6/7/22

²⁴ Interview 3

²⁵ Interview 3

“haughtiness on the part of the so-called ‘donor organizations’ is out of place, according to Christian understanding”²⁶.

Nevertheless, AFRA and SPP, as secular organizations, do not perceive any limitations imposed by BfdW’s religious nature. This suggests that the basis for a funding relationship with BfdW are to be found in a broad sharing of values, which do not have to be necessarily linked to Christian values. BfdW’s strive for equality between donors and NGOs is exemplified by their willingness to change and transform through these relationships; on their website, BfdW states that “after decades of transformative experience, we can learn a great deal from our partners in the South. They are already designing and living sustainable alternatives. We want to make their approaches visible in Germany. The South-North exchange can help us move forward on the path to sustainable societies”²⁷.

Aware that complying with bureaucratic procedures can be difficult for small and grassroots civil society organizations, BfdW encourages large and institutionalized NGOs to build the capacity of third parties with the funds provided by BfdW, so that they too are able to engage in complex funding procedures. This initiative, and its possible drawbacks, are further investigated in chapter 4. I assume third party capacity-building to be an attempt to tackle unequal power dynamics between donors and NGOs that materialize in the complex procedures for obtaining funds. However, this attempt is far from radical in terms of tackling the root causes of unequal power dynamics between donors and NGOs. Rather, it is an attempt to mitigate a recognized shortcoming without reforming their funding model.

As for their understanding of local communities, BfdW embodies a charitable, compassionate idea of *people in need*, embodied in the adjectives *affected*, *marginalized*, *poor*, *vulnerable*. The use of phrases such as (emphasis added) “we draw up ways of improving conditions”, “we strengthen the poor”, suggests that BfdW assumes the role of “empowering” people through the projects they fund, instead of providing them with the resources to pursue their own empowerment path, or assuming that they are already empowered.

²⁶ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/en/bread-for-the-world/about-us/>, last accessed 2/2/21

²⁷ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/en/bread-for-the-world/about-us/>, last accessed 2/2/2021

Another tenet of BfdW's work is their endeavor to influence political decisions on the global stage, in a way that reflects the interest of the poor and the marginalized. However, confirming what I have indicated in the former paragraph, BfdW seems to not aim at helping communities develop capacities and strength to influence local politics, but rather to take up the role of spokespersons for the poor and marginalized. This is indicated by phrases such as “we attempt to influence political decisions and legislation in a manner that reflects the interests of the poor” (emphasis added), and “we show them how to avoid agricultural methods that damage the environment and climate and how to acquire adapted seeds with a better chance of surviving drought or floods. We help communities adapt to climate change, for example through irrigation systems or the renaturation of soils and forests. We help small-holders access weather and climate information, so that they can use this to farm their land accordingly” (Annual report 2019).

So far, BfdW seems to give little space for local communities affected by environmental projects to self-determine their needs and claims and chose their empowerment path. However, seemingly contradictorily, BfdW also understands development as a bottom-up process rather than top-down imposed. BfdW makes references to people acquiring the necessary capabilities to “shape their own development”, and associates development to adjectives such as “peaceful” and “human-right based”. For BfdW, the conditions to advance this idea of development are to be found in values such as religious freedom, tolerance, community, equality and participation²⁸.

BfdW has no specific environmental goals in mind when funding projects. Instead, it conceives environmental protection and conservation as a duty of humanity, as nature was given to humans by God to conserve and protect. This is revealed by their goal of bringing about what they call a “socio-ecological transformation” based on their contributions to SDGs, and to “protect Creation”²⁹. This is exemplified in statements such as: “Throughout the world, human beings are destroying natural resources, (over-) using them and, thus, fuelling climate change. The populations of poor countries, in

²⁸ https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/2_Downloads/Ueberuns/Strategic_Priorities_BfdW_en.pdf, last access 10/12/21

²⁹ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/themen/sozial-oekologische-transformation/> last access 10/12/21

particular, will be left to deal with the consequences. Together with our partners, we position ourselves alongside them – to preserve God's creation. Together with our partner organizations, we support smallholder families in their fight against environmental destruction and natural resource depletion” (Annual report 2019).

This understanding of nature tends to exclude any view of the relationship between humans and nature other than the conception of nature and people as separate entities. The neat differentiation between “people” and “nature, based on a dichotomy between what is natural and pristine and what is human (see Ugglå 2010) might not correspond to the conceptions of nature held by the populations where the projects are implemented. Indeed, euro-centric “nature talk” posits human as masters of nature, not taking into consideration that some humans consider themselves as part of nature (Choudry 2013), and can be an obstacle for NGOs willing to build their projects on different local communities’ worldviews.

As anticipated, as a faith-based organization, BfdW holds religion as one of its founding pillars. With the limitations of this thesis, it was not possible to assess to what extent BfdW’s religious character has a positive or negative impact on local community participation in funded environmental projects. The literature presents different views on faith-based organizations working in the development sector (see Bhagwat, Ormsby, and Rutte 2011; Lipsky 2011; Clarke 2007). However, they all agree in saying that donors that fund church-based organizations in the Global South have the huge advantage that faith leaders have a great influence on their local communities’ hearts and minds, and that that church-based organizations effectively reach the target group on the ground, as they are well-rooted in the local communities³⁰³¹.

BfdW’s funding rationale, understood as the assumptions that encompass their beliefs and values is pretty straightforward. Their main goal is to improve the material and spiritual condition of

³⁰ Interview 2

³¹ This view is shared by The Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT), that in this work is analyzed in relation to the EU, has chosen to partner up with a religious based organization to carry out their project, and agrees that religious organizations are closer to communities, and consequently funding them is also a way to more efficiently meeting their needs.

the so called poor and marginalized and is epitomized in statements such as “we have placed the right of marginalized and disadvantaged people to live in dignity at the heart of our work”³². To do so, they distribute funds in order for CSOs, churches and communities to work together, building on the belief that these processes must be “shaped by the people who are directly affected” and “anchored at the local level”³³. On paper, this sounds like an ideal approach. However, the relationships between BfdW and the NGOs it funds presents some complexities.

On the one hand, BfdW’s religious character might lead us to think that they would make it difficult for secular organizations to get BfdW’s funds, but, as confirmed by NGOs under analysis, BfdW is perceived as a donor who recognizes NGOs knowledge and expertise, and that is willing to change and adapt its strategies to their needs. In addition, BfdW does not give priority to environmental goals over people’s needs; however, its understanding of nature and the human realm as separate entities, if put into practice in project implementation, might hinder the participation of local community members’ with a different understanding of environmental governance. Also, BfdW’s attitude towards empowerment might appear somewhat paternalistic, for example, in their willingness to take up the role of spokespersons for the marginalized. However, globally, BfdW’s recognition of unequal power dynamics and their willingness to address them paints it as a donor that has the potential to facilitate NGOs in their efforts towards local community participation, while not giving rise to NGOization processes.

3.2 European Union (EU)

For the EU, I analyse a single call for grants issued in early 2020, the *Climate Change Champions*, managed by the EU delegation in South Africa. At the time of writing, the NGOs under analysis are at an early stage of implementation of their projects.

³² https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/2_Downloads/Ueber-uns/Strategic_Priorities_BfdW_en.pdf, last access 13/9/2022

³³ https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/2_Downloads/Ueber-uns/Strategic_Priorities_BfdW_en.pdf, last access 13/9/2022

The EU recognizes the presence of power differentials in relation to its grantees, by acknowledging that the procedures for accessing EU funds can be difficult for applicants to deal with, especially due to heavy administrative procedures that can limit the access of grassroots organizations to EU funding: “Because of our procedures are a bit heavy, and there are the administrative side and all of that, it's not so easy for the grassroots organizations to access our funding”³⁴. Like BfdW, the EU takes actions to mitigate this admitted drawback by encouraging larger and more institutionalized organizations to build the capacity of small and grassroots organizations through third party funding. This means that large and institutionalized NGOs are encouraged to build partnerships with small and grassroots organizations, so that the latter can benefit from EU funding, although not directly. The EU thus tries to make up for the inaccessibility of their funding procedures to small and non-professionalized organizations, albeit without altering or revisioning its funding model to the benefit of local NGOs and local communities. Indeed, in order to be able to access EU funds, small and grassroots organizations are supposed to build their capacities by forming consortia with more professionalized organizations, so that, in the future, they will also be able to obtain EU funding. In this way, small and grassroots organizations adhere to institutional donors’ funding models, thus possibly professionalizing and losing their grassroots character.

The specific objective of this call for grants is to enhance the participation of South African CSOs in tackling climate change. However, the global objective of this call for proposals is to enable South African CSOs to engage as actors in governance and development at the country level. As explained in chapter 2, the NGOs funded by this call have different focuses and do not necessarily have a background in climate action: AFRA’s focus is primarily on land rights for farm dwellers, so it is not an environmental NGO strictly speaking. For this project, AFRA partnered up with Indigo, an organization that has extensive expertise in climate change adaptation. The mandate of this project comes from the grassroots: AFRA works in partnership with community formations, where AFRA brings its own competencies and skills that communities might not have. AFRA had already had experiences with EU funding and decided to take the lead on the project and to partner up with another

³⁴ Interview 1

organization that had expertise on climate change but did not have previous experience in managing EU funds. This kind of partnership is a good example of the idea behind the EU's funding strategy: an organization that has experience with EU funding partners up with another organization that does not have any experience with EU funding, but has expertise in climate change mitigation and adaptation, so that they complement each other's skills.

Similarly, SCAT, another organization funded by this call for grants, has specific expertise on social change, but had not previously implemented projects with an environmental focus³⁵. In order to mitigate this drawback, SCAT partnered up with SAFCEI, a multi-faith environmental organization with expertise on climate action and solid connections with religious leaders that operate on the ground and that have influence and leverage in local communities³⁶.

As explained earlier, while climate change mitigation is the object of the call, for the EU, strengthening local Civil Society Organizations is the underlying reason for the creation of the fund, following the Thematic Program *Civil Society Organizations and local authorities*³⁷. Indeed, the EU sees its thematic instruments as a tool to enable funding for civil society activities outside geographic (national development) programs (Giffen and Judge, 2010). Strengthening local civil society is thus one of the main aims of the EU's agenda, with a view to enhancing people's participation and influencing the democratic system, while also being instrumental to pursuing sustainable development in South Africa more independently and more effectively. In fact, the idea of development put forward by the EU is conditional on the strengthening and independence of local civil society.

In order to issue a call for grants that would correspond to South African CSOs' priorities in the field of climate change, the EU delegation in South Africa held a series of consultations with CSOs. The EU applies a wide definition of civil society (Parks 2015), that also includes academia, although the organizations that attended the consultations were mostly INGO branches in South Africa and South

³⁵ However, climate is considered an umbrella for all other issues SCAT tackles, for example when dealing with food security issues, that are inevitably tackled from a climate change perspective (Interviews 13 and 14)

³⁶ Interview 14

³⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/cso-la-mip-2014-2020_en.pdf, last accessed 12/17/2020

African NGOs. Along with consultations, information sessions about the call for grants were held in major South African cities. After that, the presentations were published in the call's website, with the possibility to ask questions and request clarifications. In addition, the more professionalized NGOs that participated in consultation sessions were asked to organize consultations and information sessions with more grassroots-oriented and less well-resourced organizations and communities³⁸.

These initiatives represent a significant effort by the EU to be inclusive and design its funding programs jointly with local civil society. However, only one NGOs out of the four that I analyze in relation to this call for grants was invited to participate in these consultations, and this organization is WWF-SA, which I consider to be the most institutional organization in my sample. SCAT was not surprised at not being involved, as it does not have a specific focus on climate change³⁹; as for Indigo, they were not part of the consultation process, but felt they should have been, as part of the Adaptation Network, an important South African Network for climate change adaptation that includes representatives from civil society, government, academia and business. This suggests that how the EU chooses the organizations with which it consults is unclear, as well as whose voices they are hearing and how they reach out to CSOs⁴⁰.

With regard to the local communities that are supposed to be the targets and beneficiaries of the projects, the EU refers to them as *citizens*, in line with an idea of active political participation with the aim of having an impact on policymaking. The EU, in addition, puts a strong emphasis on *young* people as the most affected category by climate change and consequently the category that should be given voice and agency in this regard. In fact, despite being aimed at financing projects that actively contrast climate change, the *Climate Change Champions* initiative considers the goals of climate change mitigation and people empowerment as parallel and mutually-reinforcing, without the former overwhelming the latter. “The call intends to tackle climate change while enhancing gender equality and participation of the youth and encourages innovative partnerships with the double objective of

³⁸ Interview 1

³⁹ Interview 14

⁴⁰ Interview 6

leaving no-one behind and leveraging the strengths of different stakeholders”(Guidelines for Grant Applicants).

Like other big donors, such as the CEPF, the EU emphasizes global goals, specifically the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. The EU is specific in mentioning what goals this call is contributing to: SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), along with South Africa’s NDCs under the Paris Agreement. In this case, contributing to global goals was not the priority of the call, and no formal requests were advanced to keep track on contributions to the SDGs for the projects. However, it appears that compliance with objectives related to global goals can be a challenge, especially for organizations that are not used to make policy arguments at a scale they are not used to working at ⁴¹.

The EU’s funding rationale with specific reference to the *Climate Change Champions* call for grants is rather explicit. The EU goal is to strengthen CS in South Africa, in order to engage as actors in governance and development enhance the quality of its democracy. The focus on climate change as the object of the call was selected as a global priority.

The EU recognizes the power differentials between donors and NGOs, and to tackle them they adopt a mechanism that is analogous to BfdW’s, that is that professionalized NGOs should build partnerships with smaller and less professionalized NGOs, which, as in the BfdW case, provide smaller organizations with the possibility to access funds. However, this process might lead to smaller NGOs’ professionalization and subsequent removal from their original missions. Despite recognizing ongoing unequal power dynamics, an organization such as the EU, whose action is regulated by a long chain of upward accountability, might not be able or willing to adapting its funding model to the needs of beneficiaries because of the political constraints and upward accountability mechanisms in place.

CS building and partnership building are pivotal for this call for grants, so much so that forming consortia with other organizations is compulsory under the call’s rules. However, as the consultation process described in the chapter shows, the EU’s perception of the CS organizations that should be

⁴¹ Interview 7

consulted is narrow and might fail to include those organizations that are closest and most responsive to local communities. The specific focus on climate change, however, does not outplay the focus on people; on the contrary, the two targets seem to be considered compatible and mutually reinforcing.

3.3 Green Trust

The organization under analysis in relation to the Green Trust is Indigo Development and Change, with the *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld* project.

As specified in the previous sections, the starting point for my analysis is that donors' recognition of power differentials is the first step to devolve power to NGOs and, by extension, share power among different project stakeholders. The Green Trust does recognize the existence of power differentials between donors and applicants, albeit indirectly, by emphasizing that applicant NGOs must contribute to the Green Trust's goals and strategy⁴². However, differently from the other donors analyzed so far, the Green Trust does not take any measures to mitigate the consequences of unequal power relations. Conversely, their proceedings suggest that applicants must instead take the responsibility to completely adapt to the Green Trust's provisions. This is exemplified by statements such as "We place the onus on the applicant to qualify. We are not under pressure to disburse. They are under pressure to qualify"⁴³, and "a potential executant that wants to apply to the Green Trust would review the application guidelines and determine if they have a project that would make a contribution to the Trust's investment strategy"⁴⁴.

The donor thus somehow recognizes but tacitly approves this imbalance of power: in order to get funds, NGOs must comply with their objectives. For the Green Trust, it is particularly relevant that the funded projects align with the strategic objectives of the fund, which are both the promotion of

⁴² Interview 2

⁴³ Interview 2

⁴⁴ https://wwfafrica.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/WWF_Nedbank_Green_Trust_Funding_Guidelines_2018_Final.pdf last access 14/9/2022

conservation of biodiversity and ecological systems, and that these activities contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of South African citizens.

Similarly to BfdW, the Green Trust describes the local communities involved in environmental projects as “keepers of natural resources”⁴⁵, in line with an idea of division between nature and human world (Ugгла 2010), that supposes that local communities should preserve natural resources for the benefit of South African people at large. In fact, the Green Trust favors projects with a “strong focus on environmental outcomes relevant to the wellbeing of people”⁴⁶, so, in their view, the environmental goals pursued by projects should be instrumental to the improvement of people’s living conditions. It emerges from the Green Trust’s documentation that people’s wellbeing is strictly considered from a social and economic point of view: “[Our objective is] to promote that ecological systems and their services underpin the social and economic wellbeing of South Africa”⁴⁷. Also, the Green Trust’s understanding of development is highly focused on the national dimension and on the well-being of South-African citizens, and global goals such as the contribution to SDGs are not mentioned in the Trust’s documentation.

The Green Trust’s funding rationale is based on improving the well-being of South African people by improving the quality of its environment; however, the importance of bringing local communities’ claims to the table is hardly mentioned. Indeed, the Green Trust does not have specific conditions for the recognition and meaningful involvement of local communities in their projects. The Green Trust’s main goal, to which the applicants should contribute, is linked to environmental outcomes that can ensure the well-being and prosperity of South Africa. The Trust’s main focus is indeed on effectiveness, tangible benefits to people and the sustainability of projects: “tangible (sic): will the solution outcome be measurable and will it feed into a larger body of work linked to the strategic intent of the Green Trust?” and “ project should focus on the work needed to create a sustainable socio

⁴⁵https://wwfafrika.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/WWF_Nedbank_Green_Trust_Funding_Guidelines_2018_Final.pdf last access 14/9/2022

⁴⁶https://wwfafrika.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/WWF_Nedbank_Green_Trust_Funding_Guidelines_2018_Final.pdf last access 14/9/2022

⁴⁷https://wwfafrika.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/WWF_Nedbank_Green_Trust_Funding_Guidelines_2018_Final.pdf last access 14/9/2022

environmental outcomes solution where the outcome is a critical, strategic, catalytic, scalable and sustainable contribution [...]”⁴⁸.

Regarding the project carried out by Indigo Development and Change, *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld*, one of the lead objectives is to develop practices that will be applicable on a larger scale in other arid regions, thus meeting the Green Trust’s “up-scalability” criterion⁴⁹. However, seemingly contradictorily, the NGOs under analysis funded by the Green Trust do not find the Green Trust to be directive about the scope and the modalities of project execution⁵⁰. This aspect will be further explored in following chapters.

Like other donors in the sample, the Green Trust’s funding rationale with regard to its ability to foster local community participation is not easy to evaluate. On the one hand, the Green Trust seem to be very directive about the scope of projects, that must fit well with its strategy; on the other hand, as far as projects implementation is concerned, the funded NGO does not find the Green Trust to be directive at all.

The Green Trust has a specific environmental focus, but rather ambiguously, the rationale behind it is that local communities, that for the Trust play the role of “keepers of national resources”, take care of the environment for the well-being of South African citizens at large.

The main hindrance with this donor appears to be about accessibility, as a donor that emphasizes efficiency and specific environmental results as their top priority. The emphasis on efficiency could suggest that the Green Trust’s funding rationale could be detrimental to local community participation in the sense that they understand efficiency alongside the idea of looking after the environment for the greater good – i.e., the South African population in general, with less particular regard for local communities’ relationships with nature and their views for protecting the environment.

⁴⁸https://wwfafrica.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/WWF_Nedbank_Green_Trust_Funding_Guidelines_2018_Final.pdf last access 14/9/2022

⁴⁹https://wwfafrica.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/WWF_Nedbank_Green_Trust_Funding_Guidelines_2018_Final.pdf, last access 4/7/20

⁵⁰ Interview 12

3.4 Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)

So far, we have seen that most donors in my sample hint to power dynamics between donors and NGOs in their publicly available documentation, some of them very explicitly, others more tacitly. The CEPF, like the EU, recognizes –albeit not in a straightforward way– the presence of power differentials, by acknowledging that their funding application procedures and expectations around compliance with Social and Environmental Safeguards can be difficult for applicants to deal with. In fact, the CEPF states “we know this may feel like a lot, but don't panic”, on their website in the “managing your financial requirements” section⁵¹. However, just like the EU and BfdW, the CEPF takes actions to tackle this admitted drawback. The CEPF does this by appointing staff to help applicants in the application and monitoring and evaluation processes and by seeking to make its guidelines as clearly written and understandable as possible, while also providing the assistance of the regional branches of the CEPF on the ground⁵².

In its rich documentation, the CEPF uses a wide range of adjectives to describe the local communities involved in conservation projects, and covers several issues related to the people affected by or involved in environmental projects. Especially in the *social and environmental safeguards*, CEPF refers to *women* and *IPLCs* as categories in need of specific protection measures. At the same time, it also refers to *local stakeholders*, including local CSOs, to underline that they must be involved in the design and implementation of projects in order for projects to succeed. With the language it uses to describe local communities and the relevance given to them and their knowledge, it shows an understanding and recognition of local communities' relevance in environmental governance: CEPF *Operational Manual* indicates that “Project design should draw upon the strengths of Indigenous Peoples Organizations and the affected communities and take into account their languages, cultural and livelihood practices, social organization and religious beliefs. It should avoid introducing changes that

⁵¹ <https://www.cepf.net/grants/managing-your-grants-financial-requirements>, last access 30/3/21

⁵² Interview 5

are considered undesirable or unacceptable to the Indigenous Peoples themselves”. “Efforts should be made [...] make use of, and incorporate, Indigenous knowledge and local resource management arrangements into project design”. “Special measures for the recognition and support of customary rights to land and natural resources may be necessary”. And again, “if the grantee does not possess the necessary technical capacities, or if their relationship with Indigenous Peoples is weak, the involvement of experienced local community organizations and NGOs may be appropriate”.

In addition, always in the *Operational Manual*, the CEPF emphasizes that local communities are not static and monolithic actors, thus recognizing their complexity: “special measures concerning women and marginalized generational groups may be necessary to ensure inclusive development activities”.

However, the CEPF was created for the protection of biodiversity hotspots, and for the purposes of this fund, people are instrumental for reaching environmental goals. The conditions of the populations living in or nearby biodiversity hotspot rest on (at least to a certain extent) the protection and the conservation of environmental assets, but the improvement of peoples’ living conditions, as well as their active participation in the projects is not the primary objective of the fund. This is illustrated early on in the opening statement of the *guidelines*, which indicates the prominence given by the fund to conservation, with people considered as “stewards” of biodiversity: “the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) empowers people in developing and transitional countries to protect the world’s biodiversity hotspots, some of the biologically richest yet threatened ecosystems that are vital to humanity”⁵³. Also, CEPF’s Civil Society Building efforts are aimed at improving its effectiveness in environmental goals (building vital constituencies for conservation), thus confirming that CEPF priorities are conservation goals.

The CEPF builds its strategy on several global goals, specifically the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and specifically the Aichi Targets, the UN Framework Convention on Climate

⁵³ <https://www.cepf.net/sites/default/files/cepf-operational-manual-2018.pdf>, last access 30/3/21

Change, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but without mentioning the role of local communities in these frameworks, nor their possible impacts on them.

However, the CEPF declares to not prioritize global goals over local strategies, and reporting on contributions to global goals is considered important because it allows the global arena to understand how local level conservation work is important⁵⁴: “While CEPF's grantees are making strides on the local and regional levels to conserve biodiversity and ecosystems in the biodiversity hotspots, their efforts also resonate at the global level. Our grantees' actions yield valuable contributions to the achievement of international goals [...]”⁵⁵.

Contributions to global goals are thus required by the funds' back donors, but are written by the CEPF staff, who takes the results from the work on the ground and ask themselves whether and where projects' achievements fit into different SDGs, Aichi targets (CBD), and UNFCCC provisions: “we are taking the results from our work on the ground, and ask ourselves where our achievements fit into these global goals [...] I take the results produced in a report, I look at different SDGs and Aichi targets, and I ask myself where I can put the results in my table.”⁵⁶.

Just like BfdW, the CEPF agenda provides a complex picture as regard community participation. On the one hand, the CEPF recognizes power asymmetries and the causes of them; on the other hand, the CEPF is a pooled fund with extensive upward accountability constraints, which comprise the burden of very complex mechanisms for applying for and receiving funds. The way the CEPF tries to tackle this problem is with assistance to applicants and “transparency”. However, the sheer length of the guidance documents can be discouraging for many organizations willing to apply. As for local communities, the CEPF demonstrates a refined understanding of their complexities, and aims at securing adequate recognition and participation through their social and environmental safeguards, that are admittedly complex but necessary⁵⁷. However, CEPF's first mission is environmental conservation, and despite the willingness to build on local communities' knowledge for

⁵⁴ Interview 5

⁵⁵ <https://www.cepf.net/impact/global-goals>, last access 14/9/2022

⁵⁶ Interview 5

⁵⁷ Interview 5

designing conservation projects, local people seem to be additional rather than necessary for achieving environmental goals. As for global goals, CEPF includes them in their strategy mostly because it is an institutional donor, but they do not seem to take over local priorities.

3.5 Thousand Currents (TC)

It is worth recalling that TC is an exception in many ways in my sample of donors, as it aims at radically changing the paradigm of grant-giving. TC does this by providing core funding, generally directly to NGOs and SMO (including informal groups) active on issues of climate justice, food sovereignty and economic justice, as TC expects NGOs and movements on the ground to know what is best for them and communities.

TC recognizes the existence of power imbalances between donors and NGOs, by making explicit reference to the “inevitable power dynamics”⁵⁸ that occur both between donors and civil society organizations and in the international development field in general. One of the ambitions of TC is indeed to dismantle these power dynamics and contribute to transforming the philanthropic sector through their self-described revolutionary funding model. In fact, TC aims at spreading this model, showing to other donor organizations that their approach, based on trust relationships with the SMOs and NGOs they fund, works, because it is lasting, sustainable, and empowering. This suggests the possibility of alternatives to mainstream funding and a departure from a model of a funding based on time-bounded projects, scaling up, and measuring outputs (see Choudry and Kapoor, 2013). In addition to this, TC also asks its grantees to evaluate them as a donor. This shows that a constant dialogue between donors and grantees is in place, as well as the willingness to accept criticism and to adapt strategies and partnership models to the needs of the funded organizations.

The names by which *people* affected by environmental projects are called appear to mirror the nature of the donor, especially in the case of TC, that sees the beneficiaries of funds as *self-determined*,

⁵⁸ Interview 4

powerful communities, that already possess—in terms of knowledge and capacities—all they need to pursue their self-assessed goals in the fields of food sovereignty, alternative economy and climate justice. TC also identifies so-called vulnerable groups such as *IPLCs, women, and youth*, to emphasize that the SMOs and the ideas they support as a donor originate from them. TC’s focus and priorities are thus clearly on communities active in environmental governance, and not the environmental goals themselves.

Global goals such as the SDGs are deliberately not mentioned, because TC sees them as an imposition, as part of the constraints that donors create to “fix different pieces of work into a mold⁵⁹”. So, TC lets the grantees themselves decide whether they wish to frame their work as contributing to the SDGs or not, but do not mention them. This is because TC wants to avoid being directive to the movements they fund, and to avoid a situation where funded groups refer to contributions to global goals only because they think that it is what TC is interested in. As in other areas, TC underlines that they do not want to influence the direction and the work of their partners by advancing a certain agenda⁶⁰.

TC also wants to spread its funding model in the philanthropic sector. Within my sample of donors, only TC appears to have this ambition, and basically aims at showing other donors that their model, based on trusting the movements they fund, works. This indicates the presence and the efficiency of alternatives to “mainstream” funding that could contrast the professionalization and depoliticization of civil society (see chapter 1). TC is in favor of a collective harmonization of donors around an alternative funding approach that prioritizes ownership and attention to local specificities. Indeed, TC aims at “growing its influence in the field of international philanthropy by becoming a more visible and vocal advocate for its partnership model and building the capacity of other funders to understand why and how it is practiced”. (Evaluation and learning report).

In order to spread the knowledge about their funding model, TC holds an annual forum for donor organizations called the *Thousand Currents Academy*, which aims to make other donors reflect

⁵⁹ Interview 4

⁶⁰ Interview 4

on their own funding practices, and helping them reflect about what “they are actually taking away from groups [SMOs, LCs] in the name of supporting them with more traditional ways of working”, as, according to them, sometimes other funders “just have not considered alternatives”⁶¹.

Specifically, the 2022 edition of the *Thousand Currents Academy*⁶² focused on the climate crisis and gave participants the possibility to “learn directly from Global South grassroots and movement leaders with decades of practice about how grassroots solutions are climate systems solutions”, and “learn from TC’s practice of funding grassroots-led climate justice movements and solutions”. Therefore, TC invests in philanthropic advocacy work to get other funders to see what is problematic about some of the funding models that exist in the world. However, such a radical change in their funding approach requires other donors to accord a great trust to their grantees and to advocate for changes in their funding models to be effected by the International Organizations that establish them.

Consistently with the considerations outlined in chapter 1, TC’s approach appears to be very desirable and consistent with the idea of community participation as local communities’ self-determination of needs and claims, because they trust the local SMOs active on social and environmental justice issues to know better, and thus provide core, long-term and unconditional funding. However, TC provides smaller amounts of funding to grantees when compared to other donors in the sample, and presents a huge issue of accessibility, as it autonomously chooses its grantees without providing open calls or competitive calls for grants.

3.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter aimed at analyzing donors’ funding rationales to understand what their values and guiding principles are, and how they shape NGOs action either towards NGOization dynamics or

⁶¹ Interview 4

⁶² <https://thousandcurrents.org/academy2022/>, last access 16/5/21

towards practices conducive to environmental justice. To do that, I analyzed donors' documentation and triangulated my findings with interviews with donor and NGO professionals.

First of all, I took into consideration the extent to which donors recognize the existence of power differentials between them and their grantees, mostly due to resource-dependency dynamics. From this analysis, it emerges that all donors recognize the presence of power differentials between themselves and the NGOs they fund in more or less explicit ways. Power imbalances materialize through strict compliance and accessibility rules, and more in general, in donors being directive and top-down in how they impose their agendas on NGOs. This aspect is relevant for my research because it shows if and to what extent single donors limit NGOs ability to build their projects in specific contexts and with a view to the specific needs and claims of local communities.

Subsequently, I assessed if and what types of mitigating or coping strategies donors develop in order to address power imbalances. Albeit to different extents, all donors except the Green Trust take measures to mitigate or contrast its negative effects.

TC and BfdW acknowledge of unequal power dynamics in very explicit terms. In order to mitigate the effects of this drawback, TC provides their grantees with core, unconditional and long-term funding and promotes its funding strategy with other donors. This approach is greatly appreciated by NGOs, as it allows them to be adaptable to changing contexts and meeting the needs of local communities. In addition, this approach has the merit of actively contrasting the projectization process as enshrined in the NGOization paradigm (Choudry and Kapoor), by adopting a holistic view of the issues faced by local communities, instead of reducing them to time-and- scope bound projects.

BfdW desires to go beyond resource-dependency dynamics and build equal partnerships with its grantees through dialogue and mutual learning. However, BfdW is not free from accessibility constraints either; these lie not its religious nature, but in BfdW' high-standard "capacity and experience requirements", that might exclude grassroots and non-professionalized organizations from participating in the calls (see chapter 4). Similarly to BfdW, for the EU and CEPF, power differentials materialize in cumbersome administrative undertakings for their grantees, that limit the accessibility to funds to small

and grassroots organizations. Although both EU and CEPF perceive this as an issue to be tackled, they justify it in light of greater benefits for the projects.

However, these practices directly point to the bureaucratization of the work of CSOs, that find themselves using precious time and resources fulfilling administrative requirements.

In order to address this drawback, BfdW and the EU encourage larger and professionalized organizations to partner up with small and grassroots organizations for capacity-building purposes, while the CEPF provides assistance for application and implementation processes, even at the local level. These strategies show mixed results. On the one hand, the efforts towards third party funding of the EU and BfdW and the assistance efforts of the CEPF allow small and grassroots organizations to get access to their funds. On the other hand, this strategy contributes to the professionalization and institutionalization of local and grassroots groups and the subsequent shortcomings as illustrated by Choudry and Kapoor (2013).

The Green Trust does not perceive power dynamics as an issue, but rather as a clear statement about their agenda and the need for applicants to adjust to it in order to get funds. Finally, with respect to the recognition of power dynamics, TC's approach, based on partnership and trust, and on the willingness to revolutionize project-based funding, seems the most helpful for local civil society organizations willing to promote local community participation in environmental projects.

Secondly, people and the environment were two other important principles on which donors build their agendas. What was of utmost interest here was assessing whether donors could combine a people-centered vision of development with the pursuit of environmental goals (Kothari, Camill, and Brown 2013). Based on the fact that community-based environmental governance should not be reduced to single time-bound projects, but rather correspond to local communities conceptions and relationships to nature, this chapter shows that the donors whose principles are not explicitly or solely based on environmental goals, such as TC and BfdW, are found to be more focused on people needs in relation to the environment where they live, rather than on people's roles or potential to realize environmental goals. However, it is fair to say that it is not straightforward that donors' attention to

people (rather than to environmental goals) necessarily corresponds to facilitating NGOs in promoting local community participation. For example, BfdW has a very clear identity and a clear mission, that can roughly be summed up as “ending world hunger” and does not mention local communities’ self-determination of their needs and claims. Conversely, donors that explicitly pursue environmental goals, such as the CEPF or the Green Trust, seem to consider local communities’ participation as effective for reaching environmental goals, rather than a goal in itself. The exception is represented by the EU, for which people empowerment —especially through strengthening local civil society— and environmental goals appear to be mutually reinforcing.

I included global goals as a lens for analyzing donors’ agendas because contributions to the SDGs, NDCs, or to CBD provisions were mentioned by some donors as missions guiding their actions. However, references to the global goals were rather superficial, and interviews with donors clarified that, especially in the case of local environmental projects, NGOs should not carry the burden of reporting on their contribution to, for example, specific SDGs. The only donors in my sample that do not mention global goals at all in their documentation are the Green Trust and TC. Indeed, the Green Trust is very much focused on the national dimension, while TC considers formally referring to global goals as burdensome for local organizations to comply with, and this would go against their principle of “not being directive”.

Overall, bottom-up participation in decision-making about their everyday lives is seen as essential for achieving the objectives set by SDGs (Nguyahambi and Kontinen 2022). At the same time “SDGs seem to pay relatively little attention to civil society, and ideas of citizens’ mobilization and social movements as agents for development are even more absent” (Kontinen and Millstein 2017, 70).

Taking the example of SDGs, the general picture of how to include global goals in local environmental projects seems to need more research in order to understand if and to what extent they provide a framework for the empowerment of local communities. For example, Ahimbisibwe and Kontinen (2021) showed how a Ugandan NGO succeeded in its effort to localize SDGs by using and adapting to the context a Korean community based development model.

Similarly to BfdW, TC is a donor that has a very clear mission besides environmental goals. One of their missions is indeed to transform the sector, where “the sector” is international philanthropy. TC is the only donor that makes references to this goal, but I deem it especially relevant as a clear example of recognition of ongoing drawbacks in the philanthropic sector. Only TC appears to have this ambition, and basically aims at showing other donors that their model, based on trusting the movements they fund, works. This suggests the existence of alternatives to “mainstream” funding. Indeed, a departure from “mainstream funding” towards a collective harmonization around a funding approach that prioritizes ownership and local sensitivity appears promising as a way to, to contrast the shortcomings due to projectization, scaling up, and measuring outputs that bring about the professionalization and depoliticization of civil society (see Choudry and Kapoor, 2013).

This analysis of donors’ agendas reveals that TC and BfdW are the donors in my sample that prove the most attentive to unequal power dynamics, and thus the most proactive in contrasting them, albeit in different ways. TC recognizes the imbalance of power between donors and grantees and is willing to actively contrast it through equal partnerships based on trust with its grantees. However, TC also pursues the objective of transforming the sector of international development by proving not only the “fairness” but also the effectiveness of its model.

This chapter shows that donors generally do have rationales for disbursing funds, and, to survive in a competitive environment NGOs face a choice: either to adapt their missions to those of the funders’ or to try to influence the donor’s mission (Balboa 2017). This can be done in many ways, for example by trying to influence the discourses on conservation, lobbying global actors, organizing boycotts (Ibid.). However these kinds of strategies require a significant amount of efforts and resources on the part of NGOs, and are therefore the prerogative of big and professionalized NGOs.

4. What it takes to access funds: challenges and opportunities

This chapter investigates how donors' eligibility requirements nurture NGOization dynamics, or, conversely, oppose them. Eligibility criteria are the rules that donors set for NGOs to enter the funding space. In this vein, they can be considered as an expression of visible power, and of hidden power, as eligibility rules can cause the exclusion of less powerful people and their concerns (see chapter 2). In some cases, they can also be an expression of invisible power, as some of these rules include considerations of who is worthy of recognition and participatory opportunities, for example, by valuing managing skills over contextual or activist knowledge.

Findings show that eligibility rules pose considerable limits to the accessibility to funds of less professionalized organizations; this is particularly evident in the requirements for capacity and experience put forward by most donors (BfdW, EU, Green Trust, CEPF). Other conditions that influence the accessibility of smaller NGOs are Green Trust's preference for funding organizations already known by WWF-SA, and TC's autonomous "scouting" of grantees, which implies the impossibility for NGOs to reach to the donor. Among the characteristics that a project should have to be selected, donors' understanding of innovation stands out as particularly relevant, as it can either foster NGOization dynamics, if it is linked to an "obsession for newness and unicity" (Green Trust, BfdW), or oppose them, if it refers to recognition of local and situated knowledge (TC, CEPF), or partnerships with grassroots stakeholders (EU). BfdW and TC oppose NGOization dynamics by supporting informal NGOs networks, which include grassroots organizations, challenging the common donors' rule of funding registered NGOs. The findings of this chapters reveal donors' reflexivity about some of their shortcomings, and a number of practices that emerge from this awareness. For example, BftW and the EU are well-aware of being agents of professionalization, and the accessibility barriers this create; measures to counter these shortcomings include third party funding (BfdW, EU), as seen in chapter 3, that enhances the accessibility of funds but can contribute to the professionalization of smaller organizations. As for the CEPF, in order to ensure that local communities are included in environmental projects and not damaged by them, it asks NGOs to comply to reasonable, but extremely long and

complex safeguard measures (CEPF). In addition, the EU values partnerships among CSOs as a measure to enhance the inclusiveness of its call for grants, but at the same time, this initiative is top-down imposed as a selection criterion. Finally, the requirement for NGOs to envisage “exit strategies” upon projects’ achievement is usually beneficial for countering local community dependence dynamics, but not appropriate for those NGOs-local community relationships that are based on the purpose of achieving long-term and complex goals.

Table 6 summarizes the findings of chapter 4

<i>Elements opposing NGOization</i>	Support for (informal) NGOs networks (trust)	Innovation as local knowledge and expertise (<u>recognition</u>)	Innovation as partnerships with grassroots (<u>inclusion</u>)	
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, TC	CEPF, TC	EU, CEPF	
<i>Elements partially opposing NGOization/ Practices to mitigate NGOization drawbacks</i>	Third-party funding (improves accessibility but causes professionalization)	Exit strategy for community ownership of the project (enhances community ownership, but poses limits to NGOs-LCs relationships)	Social and environmental safeguards (lengthy and complex requirement)	Require NGOs partnerships (partnerships are good but imposed)
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, EU	BfdW, Green Trust, CEPF	CEPF	EU
<i>Elements conducive to NGOization</i>	Capacity: limits grassroots’ organizations accessibility through professionalization	“Selling something new” to donors to get funded (projectization)	Autonomous selection of grantees (accessibility)	Priority for NGOs that had previous collaborations with donor (accessibility)
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, EU, Green Trust, CEPF	BfdW, Green Trust	TC	Green Trust

The beginning of funding relationships between donors and NGOs are shaped by eligibility systems designed to ensure that the funds disbursed by donors result in a good investment. By choosing specific eligibility criteria, donors are implicitly stating the rules that underpin their grant-making practices. By setting the criteria for accessing funds, donors create a space that they control, as they hold the power to decide who can access this space. Each donor in my sample has a different process

for selecting grantees, designed to make sure that the NGOs selected for funding, as well as the projects they present, respect specific criteria. By establishing selection criteria for both NGOs and projects, donors set an agenda that delimits *who* can access funds and *what* can or cannot be done with them. The rules of the game are thus intended to advance specific issues and types of organizations, as each donor has its own worldviews and priorities, as set out in the chapter dedicated to donors' agendas.

Along these lines, not only donors' rationales for funding, but also the actual rules for accessing funds can advance or create barriers to participation. This chapter builds on the eligibility criteria of the codebook I developed to analyze donors' and NGOs' documentation (see annex 2), which seeks to discern by what means it is possible for NGOs to receive funds. Since this category is broad in its scope and content, this chapter discusses those elements of donors' eligibility conditions that emerged as having the highest potential for nurturing or countering NGOization dynamics. These elements emerged from the broad literature on development and civil society and are then applied to my specific cases. The elements that emerged are donors' requirements for *capacity and experience*, *innovation*, *partnerships*, and *sustainability*. For each donor, I provide a brief overview of their selection process to familiarize the reader with their eligibility practices, and I then analyze their provisions for *capacity and experience*, *innovation*, *partnerships* and *sustainability* to understand what impact they have on NGOs efforts towards community participation.

More specifically, building on the *eligibility* category of my codebook, I examine the donors under analysis' provisions for the *capacity and experience* of the NGOs' staff carrying out projects, donors' and NGOs' understanding of *innovation*, the existence and the typologies of *partnerships* between NGOs and, finally, the presence of arrangements for the *sustainability* of those projects. Before that, I outline some pertinent literature and the reasoning behind the selection of these criteria as central for understanding effects on local community participation.

This chapter is based on the content analysis of donor and NGOs' documentation as outlined in chapter 2, and the emerged findings have been triangulated with semi-structured interviews to donors' and NGOs' professionals. Although the analysis is guided by the theory as explained above, other significant elements have emerged inductively.

One of the first and most universal criteria that appears in donors' rules for accessing funds concerns the capacity and experience required from applicant organizations. Capacity is generally intended as NGOs possessing the necessary resources to successfully carry out a project in the environmental field, such as human resources (project staff), sufficient knowledge of specific issues and the context in which the NGO operates, as well as project management capacity to achieve project objectives. A certain degree of experience and knowledge in these fields is required by almost every donor, though specific capacity and experience criteria may be weighted differently in the global assessment of an applicant NGO. But what do donors want exactly when they assess applicant organizations' capacity and experience?

Gent et al. (2015) claim that NGOs that are able to use the resources provided by donors to achieve tangible progress towards agreed goals are considered competent by donors in terms of having the capacity to achieve desired results. Donors tend to link competence to previous successes of NGOs and build their capacity and experience appraisals on them. It follows that NGOs need to keep a good reputation about their capacities, and this can have the unfortunate consequence of limiting their focus to short term goals that are quantifiable and visible to donors rather than focusing on longer-term goals aimed at local community empowerment.

With this in mind, in order to meet donors' capacity and experience requirements, NGOs must have a professional workforce at their disposal. This is the consequence of an evolution of civil society towards professionalization. Following the NGOization argument (Choudry and Kapoor 2013), the emergence of the phenomenon of professionalization within civil society in the Global South caused it to disconnect from its roots, and, in the long run, cease to benefit their constituencies because they are essentially focused on the priorities of their funders (Mercer 2002). These same arguments are explored from a different angle in the chapter dedicated to project assessment mechanisms.

Mease (2018) claims that because of the capacity and experience requirements present in the eligibility criteria, sizeable chunks of the funding devoted to environmental projects (over 50%) go to large environmental organizations. This view is confirmed by Balboa (2017, 120) who claims that

although the majority of biodiversity conservation NGOs are small or medium, a disproportionate share of the resources is controlled by a few large NGOs.

With this in mind, a strategy that would benefit all stakeholders involved in a project would be the cooperation between organizations that have the capacity to receive and manage considerable financial resources, and those that have less structural capacity to absorb funds but that generally possess capacity in terms of cultural, intellectual and spiritual knowledge. However, following the NGOization argument, those “imposed” collaborations could also cause the grassroots organizations included in the partnership to professionalize and institutionalize, thus disowning their very nature and disconnecting from their constituencies.

These arguments show how capacity and experience requirements are relevant for exploring the impact of donors’ provisions on NGO’s efforts towards community participation. Capacity and experience requirements can be a catalyst for professionalization and managerialism that confer legitimacy to NGOs in the eyes of donors, but at the same time detaching NGOs from their constituencies, and more generally shifting NGOs-donors relations towards contractual relationships (Elbers and Arts 2011; Suarez and Gugerty 2016). The first aim of this chapter is thus to analyze donors’ provisions for capacity and experience from a professionalization viewpoint, and their possible consequences on NGOs’ efforts towards community participation.

As anticipated, the conditions required by donors for NGOs to benefit from their funds are various. Together with capacity and experience requirements, innovation is a fairly common parameter for selection (Reith 2010). Donors can have different understandings of this contested concept, as definitions of *innovation* are not clear. Specifically, there can be significant disagreement about *who* are seen as innovators, *what* constitutes innovation, and *where* that innovation should come from (Mease 2018). Sometimes donors declare to favor “new” projects over those that build on previous experiences with local communities. Some authors call this an “obsession with innovation” (Seelos and Mair 2017), which entails continuously coming up with “brand new projects”, and the consequent need to continuously selling something new to funders. NGOs may be excluded from funding because of their willingness to carry out initiatives that take time to show their impact. In addition, NGOs might

be unable to continue to pursue previous innovative projects that have shown promising preliminary results, but that need additional time and funding to show their full potential. On the other hand, some donors have a different understanding of innovation, one that embraces the recognition and the appreciation of the knowledge of local communities through their involvement in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects. This understanding could represent a winning strategy for both donors and NGOs in terms of the efficiency and *sustainability* of projects. Indeed, NGOs' attention to the specific social, cultural, and economic characteristics of the contexts in which projects take place is to be underlined as a crucial factor in terms of project sustainability, together with valuing traditional knowledge, which is generally highly localized (Savaresi 2018). Innovation in local environmental projects can thus also be interpreted as the inclusion of and the partnerships among different stakeholders, including local communities residing where projects take place, and consequently their knowledge about their environment and more generally their livelihoods and worldviews.

Following this, it is clear that the requirements for environmental projects to be *innovative*, and the specific interpretation that each donor gives to the concept of *innovation* can have a significant impact on NGOs' capacity to promote local communities' participation in environmental projects. I therefore analyze donors' different understandings of innovation as a requirement for NGOs' eligibility for funding, also in relation to capacity and experience requirements, NGOs alliances and project sustainability.

While relationships between NGOs and donors are characterized by power asymmetries relations and thus cannot be labeled as partnerships (see chapter 1 and 3), among NGOs in the Global South, the term partnership is frequently used in the sense of a "collaboration through which organizations create a common goal, pursue it through a project based on a certain structure or arrangement, ongoing communication, and pooled resources used for that project" (AbouAssi, Makhoulf, and Whalen 2016, 436). Trust is an essential factor in a partnership amongst NGOs, and advantages can be multiple. For example, cooperation can lead to an increase in organizations' staff numbers and capacity, and thus help meet the capacity and experience requirements demanded by

donors. As outlined in the section on *capacity and experience*, human resources are indeed critical for meeting donors' eligibility criteria. Forming partnerships also contributes to reduce competition among NGOs.

The rationale for civil society organizations' collaboration is rather straightforward: when NGOs work together, they can draw more attention to an issue or a specific local struggle, increasing, among other things, the total amount of donations (O'Brien and Evans 2017). Moreover, NGOs and community organizations can exercise more influence and broaden the range of their action if they are part of networks and alliances. Indeed, partnering up instead of competing, and sharing organizational assets, abilities, information, and resources makes it more likely for collaborations among NGOs to be successful (Byrne and Hansberry 2007; Guo and Acar 2005). NGOs form partnerships for a number of different reasons. However, according to O'Brien and Evans (2017, 1403), partnerships are ultimately derived from NGO's resource-dependence on donors, and also the "volatility of donor-NGO relationships over time impacts resource strategies, as well as the organizations themselves". In this vein, they use resource dependence theories to study how NGOs form partnerships among themselves., claiming that "an organization's behavior shapes and is shaped by its orientation to resources and is best understood by knowing the challenges that organizations face in extracting resources from their environment". The way NGOs form partnerships among themselves is shaped by what kind resources an NGO needs in order to survive and in order to achieve its objectives. According to O'Brien and Evans (2017), financial and information resources are particularly important as motivations for partnering with other NGOs. NGOs frequently decide to partner up with other organizations in order jointly fundraise, as this kind of partnerships allow NGOs to pool the costs and energy they need to participate to calls for grants, which, as explained in previous chapters, are extremely time – and – resource - consuming activities. Other motivations to partner up are sharing information and pooling experiential abilities. References to partnerships among NGOs are very much connected to the other elements, such as innovation, capacity and experience. This brief review shows that partnerships among NGOs are mainly dictated by the need to be accountable to donors' provisions; In this chapter, I evaluate

if and how donors have a specific attitude about NGOs' partnerships, and if so, to what logic they respond to.

Lastly, sustainability is a contested concept, but most scholars agree that for a project to be considered sustainable it should simultaneously balance social, environmental and economic goals (Aarseth et al. 2017). Sustainability is as difficult to define as to measure. In fact, sustainability indicators cause debate in the field, especially about *who* creates them. On the one hand, sustainability indicators are considered top-down if initiated by governments or donors, if they are expert-led, and include scientific or quantitative indicators to define complex systems. On the other hand, bottom-up or citizen-led approaches generally draw on local knowledge and priorities and give preeminence to understanding the ever-evolving local context when defining indicators. It has been suggested that integrating the two approaches would lead to a more efficient and fair assessment of sustainability, but so far, not much is known about how to do this in practice (Turcu 2013).

More pragmatically, studying agricultural projects in Malawi, Hofisi and Chizimba (2013) expect that donor-funded projects generate sustainable benefits to local communities. It seems however that the benefits of these initiatives do not have a long-term effect after the project is declared completed. In their attempt to understand the reasons behind the failure in achieving sustainable benefits after project completion, they identify specific elements that can either jeopardize or facilitate project sustainability.

First of all, technology can be a double-edged sword, just like over-ambition in projects. In relation to agricultural projects, technological sophistication requires appropriate training of farmers and local communities or risk their dependence on continuous outside expertise even after the project is considered completed. In fact, Hofisi and Chizimba (2013) also notice that projects are more sustainable if their design has in-built exit strategies and capacity building programs for beneficiaries from the onset, also in order not to create any "dependence syndrome" on supporting NGOs.

In order to ensure projects' sustainability, it is also essential to make sure that communities own the projects. Indeed, the use of participatory processes in the design, implementation, monitoring and

evaluation of projects has also been found to be essential in addressing long-term changes rather than short-term outputs in environmental programs. In this vein, for each donor in my sample, I assess whether they lay out provisions and indicators for the sustainability of projects, and how this is envisioned.

4.1 Brot für die Welt (BfdW)

For BfdW, applicants set up proposals where they illustrate the initiatives they want to carry out with local communities, how they want to achieve their goals, the logical chain behind their project and how they wish to achieve these objectives. Then, the referent of the specific region where the project takes place discusses the proposal with the applicant NGO and finally summarizes the proposal in a six-page document that includes a detailed budget, a logical framework, and the description of the situation. This is then handed to the first board which decides if the project is worthwhile to fund and whether further information is needed. Afterwards, an external board must also agree to support the projects. If the project is deemed valuable, BfdW goes into contract negotiations with the organization and with an external auditor, as audits are performed once or twice a year, depending on the project⁶³.

BfdW is examined with reference to the Surplus People Project (SPP), which implements the *Realizing pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty and the improvement of livelihoods* project, and with reference to the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), which implements the *Realizing Farm Dwellers' rights Project* (detailed in chapter 2).

According to BfdW's guidelines, to apply for a project, organizations must demonstrate not only expertise in the relevant field of the project activities, but also their organizational capacity and project planning skills. In order to prove their ability to successfully implement projects, applicant organizations must provide proofs of competence, for example by presenting the achievements of previously implemented projects. These terms are fairly standard in donor-project funding, and confirm

⁶³ Interview 3

the tendency towards the professionalization of civil society through donor-funded project (Suarez and Gugerty 2016). Indeed, BfdW's staff is well-aware that the level of professionalization they require from applicants NGOs can be an obstacle for small and poorly resourced organizations whose projects are in line with BfdW's guiding principles. However, these requirements are considered necessary for fruitful cooperation, and to corroborate the credibility of BfdW as a professional development actor in the eyes of those who provide them with the monetary means for their work⁶⁴.

Given their perception that these procedures cannot be changed, and due to the fact that BfdW considers itself too big and complex a donor organization to be able to handle and supervise a large number of small projects, not least because of BfdW's upward accountability constraints, BfdW attempts to mitigate this drawback by allowing professionalized NGOs to build the capacity of small organizations using part of the funding they are provided with. In this way, the organizations that are selected to carry out projects funded by BfdW can allocate part of the received budget to fund small projects, for which the bigger organization is responsible⁶⁵. As already seen in chapter 3, this practice can be a form of professionalization, as in this way professionalized NGOs help smaller NGOs in ways that might pull them away from the grassroots to emulate bigger ones.

In light of the capacity and experience requirements demanded by BfdW, it is somewhat unexpected that BfdW's choice of grantees is not solely based on their reputation as successful project-deliverers, but also on the basis of shared values. BfdW is a faith-based organization, and about 50% of their funds is directed towards organizations that have a religious background⁶⁶. While it is difficult to measure to what exact extent the religious nature of an organization applying for funds favors it in the application process, church-based organizations are sometimes found to be not as administratively efficient as non-faith based NGOs, and for this reason they necessitate more support from the donor⁶⁷. This organizational shortcoming is allegedly balanced out by their closeness to local communities and their knowledge of the local context (Clarke 2007).

⁶⁴ Interview 3

⁶⁵ Interview 3

⁶⁶ Interview 3

⁶⁷ Interview 3

The NGOs under analysis in this work have been partners of BfdW for years, especially SPP. For this reason, their capacity and experience are already proven (although of course changes in staff, for example, might affect this perception). With reference to funded NGOs' perceptions about BfdW's attitude towards capacity and experience requirements, SPP states that having been partners with BfdW for a very long time, BfdW does not make any capacity demands. These long-term partnerships actually help BfdW to "set the bar" about capacity and experience that newly funded organizations should have⁶⁸, thus suggesting that long-term NGO partners might become indirect agents of professionalization themselves. Unfortunately, I was not able to include in my sample newly established NGOs that are being funded by BfdW, that would have allowed me to compare the perception about capacity and experience requirements of old and new partners, as BfdW is reluctant to sharing information about their grantees that they have not chosen to make public, and I could not fund this kind of information on websites⁶⁹.

Long-term partnerships are established by BfdW with a small number of partners. The longevity of a partnership is determined both by NGOs capacities and their ability to propose "ever new projects"⁷⁰. In fact, BfdW is not inclined to fund "the same all over again" but agrees t/o funding follow ups for previously funded projects if the involved NGOs widens the scope of project, for example, by involving new target groups⁷¹. This means that in order to secure long-term funding, BfdW's grantees need to come up with new projects and new initiatives, or to go deeper and/or wider with established projects. In the case of SPP, they develop a new strategic plan every three or five years, where they regularly update and innovate their own strategy. They then propose it to BfdW, which agrees to fund a percentage of that plan. This funding is thus recognized as project-funding but amounts in fact to general support for the organization ⁷².

⁶⁸ Interview 8

⁶⁹ Interview 3

⁷⁰ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/en/bread-for-the-world/cooperation/our-partners/> last access 19/9/2022

⁷¹ Interview 3

⁷² Interview 8

Some organizations funded by BfdW are part of networks and coalitions. For example, SPP is part of the *Tschincha Amacaya* network, a national alliance of organizations working on land rights. This organization is informal (not registered) and the only one of its kind that is supported by BfdW⁷³. The fact that BfdW is funding an informal organization indicates the level of mutual trust that can subsist between donor and grantee, since BfdW does not explicitly ask or encourage their grantees to form partnerships. The relationship between BfdW and its long-term grantees, based on trust and mutual respect has several positive consequences that are also illustrated in following chapters, although not ascribable to an actual partnership. One of these positive consequences is that, according to the funded NGOs, a long-term relationship between NGOs and donors benefits the sustainability of projects. In the cases of AFRA and SPP, no actual exit strategies are contemplated, as these NGOs are planning to assist the local communities they work with in the long run. However, BfdW asks partner organizations to “demonstrate that (and how) the expected project results will be sustained after the project is concluded” in the application draft. More specifically, they ask the applicant NGO whether “handing over of the project to the target group is part of the strategic plan”, “how the target group is prepared for this”, “how follow up costs can be avoided in the long term, or, respectively, be financed” (Project Proposal BfdW). As anticipated, sustainability is necessary for participation and vice-versa, as communities should be able to take projects into their own hands and their own preferred way once the NGO is gone. According to Hofisi and Martha Chizimba's framework, (2013) this attitude corresponds to virtuous behaviour on the part of the donor that wants to make sure that the project is owned by local communities after the NGO is gone. In addition to this, BfdW proves to be a sustainable funder for NGOs, as it is one of the few donors that builds long term relationships with (some of) its grantees. However, if the changes envisioned by the community are long term, and progress is unpredictable, having a defined exit strategy might not be the best way to help local communities achieving their goals. Indeed, the agrarian transformation envisaged by SPP, building on the struggles autonomously defined by people, cannot have a defined lifespan; in this vein, in their project application to BfdW, SPP states that although groups' capacity to mobilize would survive should SPP withdraw, SPP would remain

⁷³ Interview 8

committed to support them whether or not the organization is still officially engaged with communities (Project Application).

4.2 European Union (EU)

For the *Climate Change Champions Initiative*, the EU delegation in South Africa chose climate change as the focus for this call. Consultations were held with CSOs, both local and international, to raise awareness about the call and to identify priorities and needs. Then, when the call was launched, information sessions were held, to allow interested CSOs to get more information about the application process, both face-to-face and remotely. Applicants were required to submit a concept note, with key ideas about the project that applicants wished to implement. On the basis of these concept notes, projects were selected for the next phase and applicants were invited to submit a full application. Full applications were then ranked, and funding allocated to the five projects that were considered to best fulfil the call's requirements⁷⁴.

For this work I analyse a single call for grants issued by the EU, the *Climate Change Champions*, managed by the EU delegation in South Africa. At the time of writing, with reference to the *Climate Change Champions* initiative, the NGOs under analysis are at an early stage of implementation of their projects. Like BfdW, the EU requires applicants to have professional capacities, competences and qualifications to ensure the success of funded projects. Indeed, the EU delegation in South Africa's project managers measure applicants' capacity by analyzing their past project successes. The EU delegation is well-aware that the level of expertise they require can be an obstacle for small and less resourced organizations seeking to apply, and that the proofs of experience required are likely to exclude newly established organizations from receiving funds.

⁷⁴ Interview 1

To make up for this drawback, the EU resorts to a solution similar to BfdWs', where professionalized NGOs build the capacity of small organizations. However, building collaborations with other organizations is not just suggested, but is actually one of the eligibility criteria for applicant NGOs. As explained in the next section, creating partnerships amongst different NGOs to jointly carry out a project was both a necessary condition for applying and a measure of the innovative potential of projects. In addition, the evaluation also takes into account the skills, experiences and the resources of the different partners, how they complement each other, and what value each partner brings into the partnership⁷⁵. As an example, in the case of the partnership between AFRA and Indigo, AFRA was chosen as the leading organization because the EU's requirements of in terms of experience in handling funds and administrative capacity, while Indigo has extensive experience in climate change adaptation⁷⁶. On the other hand, there are cases where NGOs fulfil the partnership requirements based on different logics; Green Cape partnered up with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF), which is also the project's co-funder and does not take part of the "day to day activities"⁷⁷. Although it is not explicitly stated, Green Cape's choice of partnering up with the co-funder of the project, that will not take part in the day-to-day activities, can suggest that Green Cape's only paid lip-service to the requirement of building partnership, with the aim of autonomously carrying out its project.

When referring to innovation, the EU underlines the potential of partnerships created with "unusual stakeholders"⁷⁸. The EU wishes institutionalized CSOs to partner up with grassroots and community-based organizations, for them to complement each other's capacities and create synergies. Indeed, in the EU delegation's view, these partnerships among different organizations, which can be NGOs, grassroots groups, or local authorities, fulfil the purpose of creating new platforms where different groups can communicate and cooperate, as advocated by Mease (2018). The rationale behind encouraging these partnerships is thus the possibility of meaningfully including local communities in every phase of the project.

⁷⁵ Interview 1

⁷⁶ Interview 6

⁷⁷ Interview 10

⁷⁸ Interview 1

This obligation to creating consortia, and ideally to include small and grassroots organizations in the project design and implementation, also aims at building their capacities. In this capacity-building process, small and grassroots organizations professionalize enough to be able to be eligible for other grants in the future. As should be clear by now, following the NGOization argument (Choudry and Kapoor 2013), professionalization can have the inconvenience of watering down grassroots activism in favor of adaptation to mainstream funding models.

As for the criteria for project sustainability outlined in the introductory section (early training of beneficiaries when new technologies are involved and the presence of exit strategies and community ownerships of projects), the EU eligibility conditions does not seem to fulfill any of these. First, the EU provides *una tantum* funding, which means that, if a project requires follow-up funding, the NGOs will have to find it somewhere else. At the same time, there is no mention of exit strategies nor early training in the case of use of new technologies. The fact that the EU does not provide clear guidelines about sustainability plans does not, however, mean that the NGOs do not have them. Some of the funded organizations, such as AFRA and Indigo, have long-term plans with the local communities they work with, and will carry out their work with them even after project completion. SCAT affirms that their goals require ten or twenty years to be realized, but the three-year funding from the EU still provides a platform for them to be able to raise other funds. On the whole, the question of sustainability and appropriate exit strategies arises more significantly with organizations such as Green Cape, that have no previous experiences with local communities.

Overall, applying for EU funding is especially demanding in terms of professionalization, both for its capacity and experience requirements, and its understanding of innovation. Indeed, although innovative partnerships are aimed at building the capacity of grassroots and community-based organizations and of encouraging community participation, the EU funding model has the downside of driving them to adapting to mainstream funding models. Moreover, EU's consistent but short-term funds does not allow NGOs to build sustainability plans based on EU support.

4.3 Green Trust

The Green Trust is a joint initiative of the South African bank Nedbank, which provides funds, and WWF South Africa, that supervises projects from an environmental and a social viewpoint, and part of Nedbank's CSR funding. The selection process is carried out jointly, with Nedbank evaluating the financial aspects, and the WWF the alignment with its established thematic program.

The Green Trust receives applications in two ways. The first option is to form a partnership with WWF-SA before call deadlines; the second is an "unsolicited application"⁷⁹, where applicant NGOs autonomously develop their own projects. However, applicants are advised to co-create their proposals in partnership with WWF-SA before submitting them, to improve the quality of the submissions and make sure that they are aligned to the Trusts requirements for funding. The received applications are screened for alignment with the Trust's requirements, and those that do not conform are rejected. The selected proposals are then sent to the relevant Program Manager, who performs a second review. Then, the Program Manager defends their recommended projects at meetings with WWF conservation leaders, who provide the manager with guidance. Subsequently, the projects go to a second screening meeting with conservation and administration leaders where it is decided whether the project can proceed to the Trust Management Committee, where the project is eventually approved. The two screening meetings are within WWF structures, while the final one is within the Trust's structures⁸⁰.

The organization under analysis in relation to the Green Trust is Indigo Development and Change, with the *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld* project. Like the other donors, the Green Trust asks applicants general questions about their competencies to deliver on promised outcomes, but without going much into much detail. Besides this, one element that stands out in the selection process is the importance that the Green Trust places on the capacities and experiences of the project leader. The importance accorded by donors to individual connections and

⁷⁹ Interview 2

⁸⁰ Interview 2

capacities also emerges in relation to monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (see chapter 6). Although relevant for this study, this element is completely unpredictable, as it is based on the funder's assessment of an individual's capacities, with no clear criteria.

Another element that the Green Trust values greatly in the selection process is whether the applicant had previously collaborated with WWF SA. This is explicitly declared as a game changer in the selection process. Indigo confirms this as a fact. Indeed, the organization's long history, and having worked with WWF-SA in the past certainly helped with "checking records"⁸¹. As one would expect, this poses accessibility problems for smaller and newer organizations without such a previous relationship⁸². Indeed, there is usually a long project development phase that lasts up to nine months, where WWF forms a partnership with an applicant while jointly developing the project proposal. This process does not ensure that the project will be funded by the Green Trust, as the evaluation is performed by both WWF and Nedbank professionals; however, collaboration with WWF is supposed to bring expertise and quality to the project and will supposedly make it easier to find alternative funding sources through the professionalization brought to the project⁸³.

Innovation is given great relevance in the Green Trust's selection process. The Green Trust's understanding of innovation concerns funding projects that are "unique", and different from any other initiatives underway in the area. The "uniqueness" of the project is also a requisite for a project to be funded for more than the standard three years. This understanding of innovation as the need to come up with something new instead of building on previous initiatives' progresses is also recognized as an obstacle by Indigo staff, who deem it unlikely that a possible phase two of the current funded project will be funded⁸⁴.

Although the funding timeframe for the Green Trust is three years, and the Green Trust is only supposed to provide initial funding, there are opportunities for project extension being considered under exceptional conditions. It is not clear what these exceptional conditions are, but the approval is

⁸¹ Interview 9

⁸² Interview 9

⁸³ Interview 2

⁸⁴ Interview 9

contingent on the submission of a sound sustainability plan⁸⁵. In order to assess the project's sustainability, the Green Trust asks both for proof that the organization has a clear idea of how the project will be sustained after the funding period ends, and to provide letters of support from the involved local communities. This procedure has very practical reasons, as local communities are the "ones who will ensure the impact of the project"⁸⁶.

This section does not provide a flattering picture of the Green Trust's eligibility criteria. The drive for professionalization is well-present also in the Green Trust's conditions, not much through capacity and experience requirements, but rather through the push to establish a partnership with WWF-SA, that would thus be able to "forge" projects and to include them into the WWF's strategy. The need for homologation of projects into a funding model certainly does not help NGOs in valuing the variety of voices needed to ensure meaningful community participation. In addition, the need to come up with "unique" projects does not allow NGOs to pursue long-term objectives in partnership with local communities, even though local communities' endorsement is required by the means of support letters, and their importance for the sustainability of the project is recognized by the Green Trust.

4.4 Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)

For the CEPF, calls for grants are tied to ecosystem profiles. The CEPF has different procedures for small and "regular" grants. For the regular grants (more than \$50.000), the general secretariat receives proposals, which are reviewed, some of which are selected to move to the second stage, where fewer proposals are accepted. The small grants (up to \$50.000) are directly managed by the Regional Implementation Teams (RITs), that are CSOs affiliated to the CEPF that are located in the biodiversity hotspots where they work. RITs receive funds from the secretariat, and they autonomously perform project selection, administration, and manage the monitoring framework. The RITs are thus

⁸⁵ Interview 2

⁸⁶ <https://www.greentrust.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WWF-Nedbank-Green-Trust-Funding-Guidelines-2020-2.pdf> last access 5/5/21

autonomous, but work closely with the secretariat, since small grants should also be integral to the general strategy of CEPF.

As seen in the previous chapters, the CEPF draws its resources from six different donors that have different structures, priorities, and accountability mechanisms. The CEPF ceased to fund projects in South Africa, so, it was not possible to conduct interviews with NGOs professionals involved in funded project (emails went unanswered or people involved in the project no longer worked for the organizations concerned). However, it was possible to conduct an interview with the CEPF Monitoring and Evaluation director. Moreover, the CEPF provides extensive documentation on its website.

CEPF's capacity and experience requirements are fairly standard for an institutional donor. From an organizational viewpoint, applicants are asked to possess programmatic capacity, administrative capacity, and a financially sound accounting system. For the purposes of the fund, they are asked to have significant experience in biodiversity conservation in relation to a specific biodiversity hotspot. In addition, the CEPF is the only donor organization in my sample that thoroughly evaluates the capacity of applicants in relation to social and environmental safeguards guidelines. As explored in chapter 6, the CEPF's social and environmental safeguards are extremely detailed, and compliance is considered extremely important. The CEPF thus evaluates not only the "standard" capacity and experience level of applicants, but also their ability to deliver on any safeguard-related measure when needed. These include environmental safeguards, according to which the project should not "cause, nor facilitate, any significant loss or degradation of forests or other natural habitat" and involuntary resettlement safeguards, that "proscribe the resettlement of local people or land acquisition". When relevant, proposals also should support Indigenous Peoples and other local communities in community-based conservation and activities that enhance local tenure and sustainable resource management. All CEPF projects working in areas with Indigenous People must follow the principle of free, prior and informed consent (Environmental and Social Management Framework). Moreover, if Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) are involved in a project and the applicant lacks the relevant technical and relational capacities, the CEPF suggests involving local community organizations in the project activities. Indeed, the CEPF relies extensively on local expertise. Their understanding of

innovation builds on local knowledge and expertise, that is seen as best suited to solve local problems. These safeguards are however particularly burdensome to follow and thus challenging for applicants⁸⁷. The Operational Manual and the safeguards together add up to 400 pages. This is due in large part to the fact that these requirements are passed down from the donors contributing to the fund, such as the World Bank and the EU. However, the benefits attached to this funding model, such as transparency of requirements and accessibility of documents are considered by the CEPF to be larger and more substantial than such drawbacks⁸⁸.

The CEPF is aware that the level of professionalization these safeguards imply can be an obstacle for small and less resourced organizations wishing to apply. They attempt to mitigate this drawback by making them as understandable and straightforward as possible⁸⁹, though the documents are lengthy and complex, thus making this claim questionable.

As for collaboration between NGOs, the CEPF does not impose any requirements in this sense, even though it considers them useful. In fact, they encourage NGOs to coordinate and ally with other NGOs, also to avoid duplication of efforts. The CEPF also considers the number of networks created or strengthened by funded grantees as an indicator for measuring the improvements in the strength of local civil society according to the CEPF's monitoring and evaluation framework. In addition, the CEPF is interested in building networks itself, and in having their grantees build partnerships not only with fellow NGOs, but also with the public and private sector, in order to bridge the existing gap between the third sector and public and private sectors, to create innovative solutions to conservation problems⁹⁰. In fact, the CEPF guidelines clearly state that their support is not meant to be permanent and invites NGOs to take measures to ensure that projects will sustain their benefits even after the funder is gone. Clear project sustainability plans are an element that can strengthen the application in the eyes of evaluators. According to CEPF, NGOs networks and partnerships should also have some lasting benefit beyond immediate project implementation, in order to be considered an asset for CEPF's conservation

⁸⁷ Interview 5

⁸⁸ Interview 5

⁸⁹ Interview 5

⁹⁰ Interview 5

goals in a specific hotspot. CEPF's experience to date shows that, generally, reaching a point at which civil society can do without CEPF's support generally takes more than the five-year time period. To this end, long-term visions are developed and implemented, facilitating the development of credible, effective and well-resourced civil societies.

The CEPF displays having a long-term vision in terms of the sustainability of the projects they fund, and also to value to local communities' participation. Indeed, the CEPF considers local communities' knowledge as their primary source of innovation, and they provide detailed safeguard guidelines to ensure that projects do not cause harm to local communities. However, CEPF is a large and complex donor, and its lengthy and complex guidelines and application process might preclude access to funds to small grassroots organizations, generally considered the best advocates of community participation.

4.5 Thousand Currents (TC)

TC provides core funding directly to NGOs and social movements active around issues of climate justice, food sovereignty and economic justice. TC expects NGOs and movements on the ground to know what is best for them and the communities they serve, so, they are trusted with core, unconditional funding. Given the substantial absence of conditions on funding, this section is necessarily shorter than the previous ones. However, TC's documentation and the interview with TC's program manager for Africa provides interesting insights about the way TC selects its partners.

TC currently does not take unsolicited proposals, nor does it publish any calls for grants. It selects partners through autonomous research, on the web, in the field, and through recommendations from other organizations and donors. Regarding the capacity and experience requirements, there are no explicit conditions. TC autonomously selects the organizations they desire to fund through own research and word of mouth, without holding any calls for grants. There is not a direct competition among applicants, but it is safe to assume that when selecting organizations, they consider their reputation and capacities. As for innovation, TC understands innovations as solutions that are drawn from local

communities' own strategies and ideas. "Community-based organizations (CBOs) organizations have the power to build local skills and capacities, to link and mobilize resources, and to create/innovate new systems to end poverty." (Evaluation and learning report). In addition, TC does not interfere with the organizations it funds' preferred strategies to achieve their goals. For example, TC funds movements that engage in strategic litigation not (only) because they hope for a victory, but to bring attention to a specific issue, which is considered an innovation in itself⁹¹.

TC extensively talks of partnerships between them and their grantees. The relationship between TC and its grantees is surely the closest thing to a partnership as explained in chapter 1, present in my sample of donors. Indeed, once selected, TC basically does not have a say about the use of funds that grantees do, and the funder and the grantee have equal standing in decision-making. However, there is a significant barrier represented by the lack of accessibility of this donor, and the access to TC's funding space is where TC's power manifests itself. The main problem for organizations that wish to receive TC funds would thus be to get TC's attention.

The sustainability of the initiatives funded by TC is inherent to their procedures, as they propose themselves as long-term funders of social movements and community-based organizations that are "there to stay": "Long-term flexible support to be used by partners in ways they see fit is a highly praised but unfortunately still rare philanthropic practice. For NGOs, attaining this type of long-term flexible support to sustain its programs is perhaps a most desired objective for social sector fundraising today" (Evaluation and learning report).

4.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter shed light on donors' selection practices in relation to community participation. Specifically, my intention was to assess how donors' interpretations of eligibility conditions help or hinder NGOs' efforts towards community participation in project activities. I assume that donors hold

⁹¹ Interview 4

power over NGOs involved in environmental projects because of resource-dependency dynamics (Choudry and Kapoor 2013), and that donors' eligibility rules are an expression of visible power (Gaventa 2006). I also argue that donors with different organizational forms have different impacts on the work of civil society organizations that carry out environmental projects on the ground.

As for the modalities for disbursing grants, it emerges that the EU and CEPF have somewhat "standard" funding processes. With a call focused exclusively on South Africa, the EU pays particular attention to inclusiveness and transparency by organizing consultation and information sessions for CSOs intending to apply, although the CSOs invited to the consultation phase are arguably not representative of South African civil society working on environmental issues.

Despite being a global fund, CEPF recognizes that priorities change with contexts, and that presence on the ground matters, and so allow RITs to manage small grants autonomously. This can be read as an example of decentralization, where the central authority "does less" and trusts local authorities to manage the disbursement of grants.

The Green Trust engages applicants in a complex process, with the involvement of several different actors, and reveals that the prior endorsement of WWF-SA is a game changer for the outcome of the selection. On the one hand, this is stated clearly, for the sake of transparency, on the other it poses clear accessibility problems for organizations that for various reasons do not partner up with WWF-SA before submitting their project.

As regards the requirements for *capacity and experience*, all the donors in my sample, with the remarkable exception of TC, expect grantees to possess both administrative and financial capacities, along with expertise in the relevant field of action. They are also expected to be able to prove them by the means of sound statements and reports of previous achievements. These requirements are considered standard, as donors wish to know whether their money is ending up in "good hands". However, as explained in the introductory section, donors' demands for skilled specialists has contributed to the phenomenon of the professionalization of civil society (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). NGOs' professionalization represents an obstacle for local community participation because it makes NGOs

increasingly isolated from their recipients, and their ability to effect social change is generally limited by their focus on securing donor funds (Chahim and Prakash 2014). Instead of valuing the commitment to a cause, donor organizations view the presence of professional staff as a signal of an organization's capacity (Suarez and Gugerty 2016). Consequently, grassroots and newly established organizations are almost automatically excluded from the possibility of receiving EU, CEPF, BfdW, and Green Trust's funds. The creation of these barriers to participation of grassroots organizations can be interpreted as a form of hidden power. Through hidden forms of power, alternative choices are limited, less powerful people and their concerns are excluded, and the rules of the game are set to be biased against certain people and issues.

The EU, BfdW and CEPF recognize that the professionalization level they require can be an obstacle for small and less resourced organizations applying to their calls for grants. They attempt to mitigate this by allowing professionalized NGOs to build the capacity of small organizations using donors' funding in the case of the EU and BfdW or by making their protocols as understandable and straightforward as possible and providing thorough assistance during the application process in the case of CEPF.

These actions point to the awareness of the donors in question about the shortcomings of their funding processes, and they believe that they need to have not only institutionalized but also "grassroots" organizations on board, because of their closeness and responsiveness to beneficiaries. On the other hand, the EU's and BfdW's mechanisms of third-party capacity building can add to the burden of lead NGOs, and, not least, in the long run, professionalize grassroots organizations with the same negative consequences explained above.

Capacity and experience requirements are not always the main criterion for selecting NGOs. In at least one case, the preferences of the donor for funding organizations with whom it shares values seems to be able to reshape its capacity and experience requirements. As a faith-based organization, BfdW allocates part of its funding to church-based organizations. However, church organizations often have organizational shortcomings, and thus are not always in line with BfdW's capacity and requirements standards. BfdW is not the only donor that chooses its grantees (also) on the basis of like-mindedness;

Indeed, TC does not have an official selection process, but autonomously chooses its grantees on the basis of their own guiding principles. Finally, besides standard professional requirements, the Green Trust particularly values the individual capacities of the leader of the organization that is going to carry out the project, as well as existing relationships with WWF. Besides the shortcomings of professionalization, the Green Trust's approach also potentially poses accessibility problems to small or newly established organizations, given the fact that "who you know" appears to have a weight in funding decisions.

Following Choudry and Kapoor (2013), professionalization can also stifle an NGO's potential for innovation, as they are forced to adapt to project-based funding models dictated by donors. However, as explained in the introductory section, *innovation* means different things to different actors.

For BfdW, NGOs' ability to create ever new projects is conducive to long-term partnerships and funding arrangements. BfdW is prepared to fund follow-up projects, but only if there is a broadening in the target audience or geographical reach. Although BfdW's understanding of innovation seems to be in line with "novelty", the relationship of trust they build with (some) of their grantees does help NGOs to involve local communities and ensure their ownership of the initiatives NGOs carry out. The EU has an understanding of innovation that is mostly linked to the partnerships that NGOs build for carrying out their initiatives. "Innovative partnerships" are understood as institutionalized NGOs working in partnerships with local communities, grassroots organizations or local authorities, in order to maximize the potential of partnerships and the inclusion of stakeholders. That said, the analysis of the EU's understanding of innovation cannot be separated from the call's requirements in terms of NGO capacities, experiences and partnerships. In fact, although the NGOs analyzed were enthusiastic about a call for grants that expected them to build partnerships with different actors, those partnerships remain imposed from the top-down. Although innovative partnerships are meant to bring local organizations' inclusion, these organizations' participation in such a regulated call for grants can ultimately cause their professionalization and adaptation to mainstream funding models.

The Green Trust has an understanding of innovation interpreted as the distinctiveness of a project in relation to initiatives in the same field. Indeed, they present themselves as a short-term funder,

and rarely fund follow-up projects after the established three years funding period. If the Green Trust's "uniqueness" requirements avoid duplication of efforts, on the other hand they do not take into consideration that the socio-environmental change they seek can be nonlinear and take more time than expected, and consequently is not always compatible with strict timeframes or project limits.

On the other hand, some donors have a different understanding of innovation, one that embraces the recognition and the appreciation of the knowledge of local communities through their involvement in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects. Indeed, the CEPF and TC understand innovation as valuing local knowledge, which is of utmost importance for community participation and ownership of projects, as projects should be based on this very knowledge.

This understanding could represent a winning strategy for both donors and NGOs in terms of the efficiency and *sustainability* of projects. Indeed, NGOs' attention to the specific social, cultural, and economic characteristics of the contexts in which projects take place is to be underlined as a crucial factor in terms of project sustainability, together with valuing traditional knowledge, which is generally highly localized (Savaresi 2018). Traditional knowledge is basically the indigenous knowledge of local communities which is based on traditions. This does not entail in any way that this knowledge should be old and non-technical in nature. Based on Berkes, Colding, and Folke (2000, 1252), traditional knowledge is "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment".

As shown by the EU case, innovation in local environmental projects can also be interpreted as the inclusion of and the partnerships among different stakeholders, including local communities residing where projects take place, and consequently their knowledge about their environment and more generally their livelihoods and worldviews. The importance of traditional knowledge in environmental projects is also recognized by international treaties such as the Convention in Biological Diversity (CBD), art 8.j, that states that "parties have undertaken to respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge,

innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities relevant for the conservation of biological diversity”⁹².

The discussion on different understandings of innovation points to the importance of paying attention to the specific characteristics of different local contexts, by both grantees and donors. Indeed, the way donors value local communities’ understanding of the environment and local knowledge to pursue environmental goals ultimately tells us much about donors’ readiness to delegate power to local actors.

In light of this, the obstacles to community participation related to donors’ capacity and experience requirements and their demands for innovation are mainly linked to the limits distinctive to project-based-funding, as opposed to movement funding. This is in line with as Choudry and Kapoor (2013) and McCarthy (2004) and are typical to all the donors in my sample except for TC.

With regard to *partnerships* the EU’s understanding of partnership as discussed pertains to meaningfully involving local communities, while the CEPF encourages partnerships among different organizations with the principal aim of avoiding the duplication of efforts.

Finally, the *sustainability* of projects is also extensively referred to by donors, and a relevant element for participation, as communities should be able to take projects into their own hands and use them in their own ways once an NGO is gone. The CEPF clearly states that their support is not supposed to be permanent and asks NGOs to take measures to ensure the sustainability of the project after its conclusion. BfdW and the Green Trust ask partner organizations to “demonstrate that (and how) the expected project results will be sustained after the project is concluded”. With reference to the sustainability criteria drawn from Hofisi and Chizimba (2013), requiring a sustainability plan and an exit strategy is a necessary element for ensuring the sustainability of projects. However, it is now well known that unpredictable events can jeopardize timely project results, and that long-term funding can help NGOs to face such challenges. BfdW and the Green Trust also ask grantees to provide letters of support by local communities involved projects, believing that if a project is not supported by local

⁹² <https://www.cbd.int/convention/wg8j.shtml> last access 8/8/21

communities, projects will never be successful. Of course, a letter cannot guarantee that a specific project is supported by the totality of a community. However, at least in term of intention this appears to be I consider it to be a virtuous practice for moving towards community participation. Finally, TC approaches sustainability in a manner very much inherent to their approach, as long-term funding with no conditions attached and total reliance on local communities' and movements' wisdom and knowledge are the main tenets of their work.

This chapter presents a complex picture of donors' conditions for eligibility, including both virtuous and detrimental practices in relation to community participation. For example, TC's grant-making approach may appear ideal for community participation at first blush, in all its practices. However, TC presents significant problems of accessibility, as it autonomously selects its grantees, without providing the possibility for NGOs to approach it. Many of TC virtuous practices derive from its independence as a foundation, while bilateral and multilateral donor organizations, as well as corporate donors, appear to be less responsive to local communities' needs and claims because of their limited independence and complex upward accountability mechanisms. The organizational structure of donors thus emerges as an underlying element in shaping the chances for effective local community participation, as will become more evident in the next chapters.

Based on the assumption that one of the reasons why donors are not successful in achieving their social change goals through grant-making is that the selection of grantees is based on the individual preferences of the board rather than on actual needs. McGinnis Johnson (2016) empirically examined what emerged in the selection of grantees process when adding community members to the board. Through a sample of American foundations that include in the board community members of the communities these foundations typically serve, the study claims that "community boards" are more likely to select less professionalized NGOs and grantees, and also more eager to select new (not previously funded) grantees. However, it also seems that community members included in the board seem to select older organizations, thus taking on the age of the organization as a marker for quality, or as an indicator of the organization's embeddedness in the community. Smaller NGOs were also more likely to receive a grant from a "community board" than from a traditional board.

Mindful that it would be complicated to apply the community boards models to donors that operate at a worldwide level, and that most donors into analysis do not have the independence typical of a foundation, this process could be a good example of how really respond to community needs. Indeed, community boards give communities' a voice about how donors' money should be spent and could be a way to overcome the issues related to eligibility, such as professionalization and negative bias towards small and grassroots organizations, as explained in this chapter. Table 10 and 11 in annex 3 summarize the findings of the *Capacity and Experience* and the *Innovation codes*.

5. Funding arrangements: (potential) obstacles to NGOs' autonomy and sustainability

In the former chapter, I have examined how the rules for accessing funds affect NGOs' work. I now consider how donors shape NGOs' work once they have entered the funding space. As part of donors' explicit set of rules and conditions, funding arrangements are an expression of visible power; as they concern "who" can make decisions about "what", they can also be regarded as a form of hidden power. This chapter shows that donors' conditions over the use of funds are an important vehicle of NGOization dynamics. In particular, some donors' conditions compel NGOs to hire new specialized staff or modifying the way they organize their work. In addition, the impossibility to finance a given project after the date set in the agreement, and the strict limits on how NGOs can spend money limit NGOs' ability to respond to local communities' contextual and changing needs, thus hampering trust-building and learning. Finally, co-funding requirements further add to the administrative work of NGOs, in addition to the uncertainty to have a project funded. Once again, some donors are conscious of the shortcomings of their funding models, and advance mitigation processes. These include capacity-building measures, (that nonetheless can induce the professionalization of smaller organization) and allowing funded NGOs to provide core funding to other CSOs, a process that burdens grantees with further responsibilities.

Still, this analysis also shows that donors, especially non-governmental ones, adopt practices that directly oppose NGOization dynamics, such as providing flexible funding (that for example allows NGOs to pay for daily expenses), subsidizing the entirety of the expenses for a given project, or, in the case of TC, disbursing core unconditional, long-term funding, as, with steady sources of funding, NGOs are in a better position to meet local communities' needs and claims in the long run. These practices are a clear demonstration of donors' trust towards NGOs, that allows them to be responsive to changes and unexpected events as well as being responsive to local communities' needs.

Table 7 summarizes the findings of chapter 5

Elements opposing NGOization	Flexible funding (trust)	Core funding (trust)	Long-term funding (sustainability)	Providing 100% funding (sustainability)	
Donors	BfdW, Green Trust	TC	BfdW, TC, CEPF	Green Trust	
Practices to mitigate NGOization drawbacks /Elements partially opposing NGOization	Possibility of providing core sub-grants (improves accessibility but more responsibility to NGO)	Capacity-building (enhances accessibility but can cause professionalization)			
Donors	EU	BfdW			
Elements conducive to NGOization	Co-funding (adds to bureaucracy/accessibility)	Interfering with how NGOs organize their work (donors' control on NGOs' internal affairs)	Need to hire professionalized staff (professionalization)	Una tantum funding (sustainability)	Strict limits on use of funds (hampers responsiveness)
Donors	BfdW, EU	EU	EU	EU, Green Trust	EU, CEPF

Not only the amount of funding disbursed by a donor, but also the rules attached to these funds contribute to shaping the relationships between donors and NGOs. Most donors designate their funds to specific expenses related to a specific project funded through a specific call, and do not allow grantees to use them freely and as they deem appropriate.

Attaching conditions to the use of funds is a common practice among donors. However, not being in the field, donors often have incomplete information about the projects that they are funding. Moreover, their strategy is sometimes dictated by back-donors, according to whom funding NGOs should generate a return in terms of contribution to donors' agendas (Nunnenkamp, Weingarh, and Weisser 2009). For this reason, there are conditions that form the contractual terms that binds the recipient to expected actions or results, as a *quid pro quo* for receiving grants. This should serve for ensuring the integrity of donor-funded operations through standards of transparency, integrity and accountability.

Donors' conditions on funding frequently embody an implicit judgement that the recipients lack the necessary knowledge to pursue policies that serve their best interests, and that donors have better knowledge as to what works best (Shah 2018). Moreover, donors' conditions over the use of funds limit NGOs' possibilities to be responsive to changing contexts and local communities' changing needs. When speaking of harmful limitations to the use of funds, NGOs refer for example to the impossibility to fund staff salaries and operating costs such as rent or travel with donor funds. For NGOs that rely solely or mostly on donors' funding, the impossibility to pay for operating expenses has a considerable impact on their ability to sustain themselves and consequently to meet local communities' needs (Elbers and Arts 2011).

The problems that derive from the lack of core funding are magnified by the short funding periods and one-off agreements offered by some donors (Delfin and Tang 2008). Short-term funding has been found to undermine the sustainability of projects, while hindering trust-building and learning both between donors and NGOs and between NGOs and local communities (Elbers and Arts 2011). In addition, short funding periods and one-time contracts (as opposed to core, long-term funding) do not offer the stability needed by NGOs to build and maintain knowledge about a given context and issue, undermine NGOs' ability to undertake long-term planning, and ultimately their ability to remain faithful to their original mission and accountable to local communities.

In this vein, NGOs have also been advocating the benefits of core funding as opposed to funds earmarked to specific activities, as core funding allows NGOs to direct the use of resources to project activities and operations rather than to the preparation of funding proposals and donor reporting (Drabek 1987). Indeed, social and environmental change is rarely, if ever, a linear process, and if donors reduce social change to an "injection of money subjected to dozens of rules and constraints", to bring about a specific outcome in a specific period of time, then their theory of social change is inevitably flawed (Pearce 2010, 25). Conversely, core funding allows NGOs a precious flexibility, that contributes to their ability to develop sustainable projects, centered on people.

The conditions that donors set on the use of funds are critical for an in-depth understanding of the influence they eventually wield over community participation in environmental projects, since

NGOs who receive flexible funding are more likely to stick with communities when their claimed needs and priorities change (Andrews 2014). In evolving project contexts, I consider the possibility for NGOs to take decisions autonomously and adjust the use of funds to communities' needs and claims as a factor that facilitates community participation in environmental projects. Conversely, restrictions over the use of funds, and their level of strictness, illustrate how donors wish to maintain control over NGOs' activities, thus pointing to a lack of trust towards NGOs.

Donors' rules about the use of funds tell us about the trust that donors have in grantees, and with this in mind, this chapter takes donors' degree of flexibility in their rules about the use of funds as a main determinant for NGOs' ability to carry out their efforts towards community participation, to engage in activities dictated by local priorities, experiment new approaches, and be responsive to changes and unexpected events (Elbers and Arts 2011). On the other hand, trust relationships are facilitated if NGOs and donors have the possibility to building a long-lasting relationships (Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2006). The duration of a relationship between NGOs and donors is indeed another important element that can determine whether donors grant NGOs' some level of flexibility in the use of funds.

Further exploring trust, Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) claim that the idea of trust based on NGOs' accountability to donors fits well with a model of rational trust, which is based on the amount of information that donors have on NGOs, and is ensured by the threat of sanctions if the NGO breaks the rules. However, debates are ongoing as to whether this model of rational trust is the most appropriate to apply to donor-NGO relationships. In this vein, Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) point out that trust is complex phenomenon, that is not only based on formal accountability mechanisms, but is also determined by personal relations and contextual factors. It follows that trust is based not only on expectations built on NGOs' experience or detailed information about their activities, but also on non-measurable features such as "shared identity and solidarity, common values, group membership, and the feeling of working towards common goals" (Ibid., 141).

This introductory section has justified the assumption that core, flexible and long-term funding helps NGOs in their community participation efforts, while short-term funding restricts their ability to

meet local communities' needs. In this vein, I investigate the rules on the use of funds applied by the donors in my sample, and try to understand what factors contribute to donors' disbursement of core and long-term funding as opposed to restricted, short-term funding.

In addition, Delfin and Tang (2008) found that grant types have an important role in determining funding impact, according to some even more so than the actual amount of support provided or the organizational characteristics of the recipients.

Looking at donors' guidelines, I have identified three different modalities for disbursing grants: *competitive call for grants*, *open calls*, and *selection by the donor*. These different modalities affect the accessibility to donors for different types of organizations. In a competitive funding environment, large and professionalized organizations are more likely to access those funds, thus penalizing more local and grassroots organizations that might be smaller and more informal, but allegedly closer to local communities' needs and claims. The *competitive call for grants* involves specific conditions that applicants must fulfil. They usually have strict timeframes and deadlines to comply with and must follow specific formats. The *open call* is similar to the call for grants, as it involves the presentation of concept notes and detailed information about the applicant and the rationale for the project. The difference is that deadlines do not apply, and applicants are free to submit their projects when ready to do so, and formats are sometimes less strict. Finally, *selection by the donor* entails a selection based on affinity of values between the NGO and the donor. In this case, the donor selects the organizations it would like to fund, based on their own research and word of mouth. The donor thus proposes selected NGOs to arrange a funding agreement. In this case, the donor acts as a "headhunter" and is not directly accessible to organizations in need of funds.

A competitive funding environment, such as that created by competitive calls for grants, entails that in order to obtain funds, NGOs' strategies must align with donor priorities and interests (Banks et al. 2015). On the other hand, the direct selection by donors poses obvious accessibility issues for organizations that are looking for funding. In the cases where a selection process is planned, access to funding highly depends on applicants' capacity to deal with complex application procedures and the possession of the requirements demanded by donor organizations in terms of capacity and experience,

both administratively and in the environmental governance field. In cases of absence of calls for grants, and where NGOs cannot reach out to the donor, NGOs have to make themselves visible, and this entails either “knowing the right people” or efficiently advertising their work.

On a final note, it is also important to keep in mind that NGOs are not usually passive actors, and respond to resource-dependence from donors with strategies such as revenue diversification, donor education, compromise, or seeking flexible funding out of loyalty to their values. (Khieng and Dahles 2015; Elbers and Arts 2011; Reith 2010). However, although NGOs’ agency towards donors’ restriction is absolutely relevant in explaining donor-NGO relationships, a focus on NGOs’ coping strategies falls beyond the scope of my research and is only marginally tackled.

In the rest of the chapter, I analyze each donor’s modalities for disbursing grants, their rules on the use of funds, and their funding timeframes. This chapter is based on the content analysis of donors’ and NGOs’ documentation as outlined in chapter 2, specifically on the *Funding* category and the related codes. The findings that emerged have been triangulated by semi-structured interviews with donor and NGO professionals. Although the analysis is guided by the theory as explained above, other significant elements have emerged inductively.

5.1 Brot für die Welt (BfdW)

BfdW works on an open call basis, and NGOs applying for funding are meant to work together with the beneficiaries of the projects, that BfdW identifies as “target groups”. NGOs and target groups are thus supposed to jointly identify problems and develop project ideas, and only then set up proposals where they describe the issues that the project is going to address, their causes, and the problem-solving strategy. The proposal must also describe the intended impacts of the project and the instruments used to measure progress. In addition, the proposal requires to detail the expected costs, own contributions and financing requirements of the project. BfdW does not provide 100% funding for a project, and applicants must demonstrate they have other sources of funding (own funding or other donors) to

accomplish the project goals. In addition, applicant organizations must demonstrate that (and how) the expected project results will be sustained after the project is concluded.

Proposals are discussed with program managers within BfdW, summed up and handed to the board. Assistance mechanisms are set up by the donor to help applicant organizations with projects deemed valuable. The projects are then screened by two boards before being approved or rejected. After a project has been approved, BfdW and the applicant organization conclude a cooperation agreement in which the rights and obligations of the contracting parties are defined.

The organizations funded by BfdW taken into account for this chapter are SPP, AFRA, and SDCEA.

BfdW does not provide core funding; however, BfdW's funding is, at least to some extent, flexible. Indeed, a project is considered by BfdW to be a clearly definable component of the partner organization's work, and all expenses that are directly related to the project can be funded. In this vein, grantees are allowed to use BfdW's funds to cover salaries and some "administrative" costs, such as rent⁹³

However, what is more remarkable about BfdW, is its long-term commitment to grantees. BfdW and its grantees have in place multi-contract and multi-grant agreements, meaning that instead of funding single projects, BfdW approves strategic plans (every 3-5 years) that build on the victories and learnings of the previous period, thus allowing strategic progression that allow grantees to plan for new phases that build on lessons learned⁹⁴.

BfdW is a donor whose financial independence is rather limited, as it receives 75% of its funds from the German Ministry of Development and Cooperation and the EU⁹⁵. It follows that BfdW is subject to extensive upward accountability arrangements. However, by committing to long-term relationships with its grantees for example, it shows to be able to challenge mainstream donor practices and help their grantees make their work with local communities sustainable in the long run.

⁹³ Interview 3

⁹⁴ Interview 7

⁹⁵ Interview 2

The way SPP works with BfdW can make this point clearer. Most of BfdW's grantees operate over three to five years cycles, and at the end of every cycle an external evaluation is performed. This evaluation is followed by a strategic plan, and the NGOs then propose to BfdW to fund a specific percentage of that plan over the period in question⁹⁶. The strategic plan is also what is then proposed to BfdW and any other (long-term) funders requiring proposals in that period. What is unusual, is that while the language used by BfdW is that of project-funding, and the activities funded are recognized as projects, the funds disbursed add up to general support for the organization and their strategic plan.

Analysis of documentation validated by interviews shows that BfdW adopts practices that are conducive to NGOs' downward accountability as far as the duration of funding and the flexibility in its use is concerned. However, just like the EU and CEPF, BfdW limits its funding to cover only a percentage of the cost of projects. This mechanism causes problems for NGOs related with the need for co-funding projects and programs, such as the workload of reporting to different donors with different standards. BfdW recognizes this drawback, and the difficulties it creates for grantees. However, they justify this practice by stating that they have to complement government funding with their own finances, so they are basically applying the same policy to their grantees: "what we usually do not do, is to finance a project 100%. This makes it more difficult for the partner (grantee), especially if you have different standards, but all the money we receive from the ministry, we have to top-up by 25%. The partners have to bring in their own means or co-finance"⁹⁷.

For AFRA, at least in one case, a long-term and successful relationship underpinned by mutual trust was instrumental in handling this shortcoming. In fact, at some point, the Reith Foundation and BfdW co-funded each other⁹⁸, agreeing that one should cover the salaries and the other the project activities. This shows that the relationship between two donors can create positive synergies and avoid NGOs a lot of problems.

⁹⁶ Interview 8

⁹⁷ Interview 2

⁹⁸ Interview 7

As far as the modalities for disbursing grants are concerned, BfdW opts for an open call, where proposals are judged on the basis of their feasibility, utility, and local stakeholders' inclusion.

With these capacity-building efforts, BfdW commits to helping applicant NGOs to access funds; on the other hand, this also shows that donors seek out projects that fit their agendas and worldviews. These capacity-building efforts could either point to BfdW helping less able NGOs to access funds, or to donors seeking out projects that fit with their agendas and worldviews, through enforcing specific kinds of knowing and organizing (Choudry and Kapoor 2013).

In conclusion, by providing long-term funding, BfdW does help NGOs to make their projects sustainable in the long run. Also, BfdW provides flexible funding to some extent, as all the expenses related to a project can be covered, thus allowing NGOs to adapt to changing local contexts. However, there is an apparent drawback in BfdW's rules on the use of funds, that is the requirement for project co-funding, presumably due to upward accountability constraints, thus putting NGOs in the position of having to look for other sources of funding and to deal with different donors' requirements. Moreover, BfdW's potentially professionalizing capacity-building attitude could bring both donors and NGOs to overlook local worldviews and resources (Choudry 2013).

5.2 European Union (EU)

As in former chapters, I analyse a single call for grants issued by the EU, the *Climate Change Champions Initiative*, managed by the EU delegation in South Africa. The organizations discussed in relation to the EU for this chapter are the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), Indigo Development and Change, Green Cape, WWF-South Africa and the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT).

In this call for grants, applicants were required to send *concept notes* about their projects within a specific deadline, after which proposals were evaluated and ranked. For the projects that gained the highest scores, applicants were invited to submit a full proposal, evaluated again, and finally funds were

allocated to the organizations with the highest scores. Before issuing the call, the EU organized consultation and information sessions with local CSOs in order to jointly identify actual local needs and priorities.

The EU project manager recognizes that the requirements of this call for grants are demanding and unlikely to be accessible for small and grassroots organizations because of the professional skills they require⁹⁹. Moreover, monitoring funding sources and preparing applications takes a great deal of time and resources and is thus a source of considerable risk for smaller NGOs, considering that, according to the experience of a well-established NGO, the success rate is of about 10-15%¹⁰⁰. From a community participation perspective, this means that the organizations that are supposedly the best advocates for local community needs and claims (Chahim and Prakash 2014) are more likely to be excluded from these funding opportunities. Donors are well aware of this, and in order to address this shortcoming, the *Climate Change Champions* call encourages professionalized NGOs to build partnerships with smaller and less professionalized organizations to allow them to access those funds and build their capacity, as seen in the above-mentioned case of BfdW. Similarly, then, these procedures are a mixed blessing. On the one hand, small and grassroots organizations are allowed to build their organizational capacity through partnerships with more institutionalized organizations, and thereby to access EU funding. On the other, the consequence of this third-party capacity building could be homologation and professionalization, with the resulting depoliticization and removal from the grassroots (see chapter 4)..

As regards the strictness of the use of funds, generally, one of the characteristics of project-based funding as opposed to core funding is that the former does not cover staff salaries and operational costs. In the case of the *Climate Change Champions* call for grants, the salaries of the staff involved in the project are covered, albeit with some constraints. For example, it is required that NGOs record the time that each member of the staff devotes to a project, by the hour¹⁰¹. This procedure is evidently onerous and does not necessarily correspond with NGOs' *modus operandi*: some organizations have a

⁹⁹ Interview 1

¹⁰⁰ Interview 7

¹⁰¹ Interview 6

holistic approach to their work, and the staff manages more than one project at the same time. In these cases, monitoring the exact time a member of the staff spends on one single project can be arduous. In addition, NGOs point out other drawbacks related to the perception of donors' control over them. For example, staff that had been working for years as a consultant for an NGO had to be hired through a tender process to meet EU requirements¹⁰². This is an example of how a donor can interfere with the self-organization of an NGO, even modifying its internal structures and the working relationship with its staff.

It is interesting to see that Green Cape and WWF South Africa, the groups I consider to be the largest and more institutionalized NGOs in the sample of organizations that have gained access to EU funds, do not raise any concerns about the burdens associated with the EU funding conditions, which they consider to be adequate for the size of funds disbursed¹⁰³. However, Green Cape hired additional staff to carry out the EU project, specifically professionals to assist in “project management, monitoring and evaluation and training activities for community and youth contexts” and a service provider in charge of “designing a basic visual identity for the project”. In addition, Green Cape also issued a job opportunity offer for a project officer in charge of the day-to-day project administration, the monitoring and evaluation requirements of the funder and for supporting the project team on project delivery¹⁰⁴. Similarly, SCAT hired an intern to assist the *Climate Change Programme Coordinator*¹⁰⁵, and WWF-SA hired a *Project Officer for CSO engagement*¹⁰⁶. Grantees hiring additional staff to carry out the EU project can suggest that, at the time of their application, they did not have the in-house capacity to properly implement all project activities, as required by the call for grants, and that EU funds allowed them to integrate the staff with the expertise they assumed they were lacking for carrying out the project. However, the necessity to hiring additional staff also suggests that NGOs perceived the need to acquire

¹⁰² Interview 6

¹⁰³ Interviews 10 and 12

¹⁰⁴ <https://greencape.co.za/assets/GreenCape-Opportunity-Project-Officer-SA-Climate-Change.pdf>, last access 24/4/22

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.scat.org.za/vacancy-paid-internship/>, last access 24/4/22

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.iej.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Staff-Vacancy-Project-Officer-CSO-Engagement-April-2021-PU-Updated.pdf>, last access 24/4/22

a certain kind of expertise they were lacking, a fact that can be read as “professionalization in action” and that can change the nature of NGOs in the long run. Indeed, with professionally trained staff becoming the norm, NGOs could end up changing the way they perceive they should be to adapt to donors’ standards.

As explained in the introductory section, the two main problems related to the use of funds identified in the literature are the lack of core funding and short-term funding agreements, that jeopardize the sustainability of projects. However, it is important to remember that NGOs do have agency, and can and do find solutions to NGOization shortcomings, thus emphasizing that they are not powerless with regard to donors’ conditions (Elbers and Arts 2011).

With its distinctiveness as a re-granting organization, SCAT provides examples that confirm this idea. SCAT both applies for funds to donor organizations and acts as a donor by disbursing them to local community-based organizations. One of the actions undertaken by SCAT in the context of their EU-funded project was to invite CBOs to apply for SCAT’s micro-grants in order for them to autonomously undertake actions in their own communities that include the implementation of tangible adaptation intervention, political interventions, sustained climate literacy campaigns and a combination of the above (Grant Application Form). SCAT thus acts as a local intermediary between the EU and the CBOs, maintaining contacts with a broad network of community organizations and an in-depth knowledge of the context of action. The financial support that SCAT disburses to CBOs is designed to empower them to determine how climate finance will be used, and build their own institutional capacity for implementation and adaptation at the local level.

Indeed, SCAT’s approach is to provide funding to organizations that are already carrying out their own initiatives¹⁰⁷. This procedure is introduced in SCAT’s project proposal, and thus approved by the EU, that selected the project as worthy of funding. This process, that essentially consists in transforming the EU’s restricted funding into core funding for CBOs, can be seen as a way to bypass NGOization dynamics: indeed, while the EU is not allowed to provide core funding to its grantees, these

¹⁰⁷ Interview 13

same grantees can unconditionally fund CBOs and grassroots organizations. However, on a less bright side, this procedure adds an additional layer of reporting and management, with the onus on the primary grantee to ensure compliance and accept liability if things go wrong. So, if on the one hand providing core-funding subgrants to CBOs is a virtuous practice, it is probably an available option only to NGOs that are equipped with a strong administrative structure.

As for BfdW, another problem identified by EU's grantees is that they must have a co-funder to cover a percentage of the expenses. The EU does not fund 100% of a project's costs¹⁰⁸, and grantees must find complementary sources for project funding. Problems associated with co-funding include the difficulty of identifying and bringing on board co-funders in a highly competitive environment. Moreover, having to deal with more than one donor for the same project also implies complying with two or more donors' requirements. This can in turn increase the fundraising and reporting workload, potentially to the detriment of the NGO's work in local communities.

EU grantees adopt different strategies to cope with co-funding requirements. In the case of the *Innovative Partnerships for Change* project, AFRA provides co-funding for activities for the first year, while other partners will kick in in years two, three and four¹⁰⁹. This is thus a case where the lead NGO itself provides the percentage of funds necessary to start the project.

For Green Cape, co-funding was not a problem. In fact, they had previous relationships with their co-funder, the FNF, who is also their partner for the implementation of the project. Having a co-funder which is at the same time a partner in the implementation of the project could be found to be problematic for the autonomy of the NGO in project implementation; however, the Green Cape feels that the autonomy of the NGO in this case is not jeopardized, because they signed a memorandum of understanding confirming that Green Cape would remain in charge of the operative decisions and the day-to-day project activities. This attitude denotes a relationship of trust in place between the NGO and the co-funder, which is the result of a long-term partnership¹¹⁰. As for WWF- SA, this is the first time

¹⁰⁸ The EU covers the majority of the costs of a project, in this call for grants a minimum of 84%

¹⁰⁹ Interview 7

¹¹⁰ Interview 10

they receive EU funds in the field of climate change with a focus on communities, but not the first time in general in the organization's history. At the time of the interview (August 2021), co-funding details were not figured out yet, and the project staff was considering a few alternatives, including the Green Trust (WWF and Nedbank). However, co-funding was not reported as a major issue.

This section does not provide a particularly flattering picture of the EU, at least as its rule for the use of funds are concerned. This can be ascribed to three main reasons: the strictness of the rules about the use of funds, the impossibility for NGOs to build long-term funding relationships with the EU, thus precluding all the benefits that a relationship between an NGO and a donor cemented by trust can bring, and the bureaucratic caveats of finding a co-funder. This section also shows that NGOs can overcome the problem of the lack of flexibility in the use of funds if they have their own sources of funding, or other "friendlier" co-funders. However, the organizations who do not hold this kind of resources are actually excluded.

Despite these shortcomings, the EU is considered an important funder to have on-board, as it provides large amounts of funds. In this call in particular, the amount disbursed to these organizations ranges from a minimum of EUR 539 516 (Green Cape) to a maximum of EUR 699 956 (SCAT).

The many rules and conditions set by a generous but demanding donor can undoubtedly be an obstacle, also for large and well-capacitated NGOs. Smaller NGOs, and at the same time those that have specific community empowerment missions such as AFRA, Indigo and SCAT, raise comparable problems when dealing with a donor such as the EU: first of all, having staff, time and resources dedicated solely to EU funding from the inception of the concept note to the final evaluation; secondly, co-funding as a possible source of additional bureaucratic burdens and not easy to find¹¹¹; thirdly, the impossibility of receiving additional funding after the conclusion of the project, thus jeopardizing its sustainability, and the difficulty to build a partnership based on trust as experienced with other long-term donors.

¹¹¹ Interview 7

The EU staff in charge of the call for grants was praised by grantees for being responsive and for having built a good relationship with most grantees, also demonstrating a certain degree of flexibility in the use of funds, especially during the pandemic. However, despite the recognition of shortcomings and attempts to facilitate project processes, the long chain of upward accountability of “big” donors makes it difficult for single “insider” individuals to change the system in place.

5.3 Green Trust

The Green Trust is analyzed in relation to Indigo Development and Change, specifically with regard to a follow-up of a previous project: *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld*.

The Green Trust processes applications three times a year. The organization arranges two types of different procedures: *solicited* applications, that are encouraged through partnerships *previously* formed between local civil society organizations and WWF South Africa, and *unsolicited* applications, that are submitted without previously forming a partnership with the WWF. As explained in chapter 4, applicants are advised to co-create proposals together with WWF South Africa before submitting them to the Green Trust, in order to improve the quality of the submissions and make sure they are aligned to the Trusts requirements for funding.

As concerns Indigo’s project, it was born out of a stewardship forum attended by both Indigo and WWF-SA’s staff, where WWF-SA’s informally proposed to Indigo to build a project on Climate Smart Agriculture: “this specific project was born out of a stewardship forum [...] some of WWF people said that this could be an idea that Indigo could look into, this is how it actually came about”¹¹². The fact that for the Green Trust a pre-existing relationship with WWF-South Africa facilitates access to funds for applicants is justified as an act of transparency by the Trust¹¹³. This implies that in order to maximize the chances of being funded, applicant NGOs have to build a relationship with WWF SA

¹¹² Interview 9

¹¹³ Interview 2

during which WWF SA is presumably shaping the applicant organizations' project designs in ways that are compatible with, and contributing to the overall Green Trust strategy, thus extending their network, their influence and disciplining applicant NGOs activities. The need to have a partnership in place with WWF SA in order to have the best chances to get funded, possibly constitutes an obstacle to small and/or newly established organizations that do not have yet a network in place, and that do not have direct contacts with WWF-SA professionals.

The Green Trust does not provide core funding to grantees, and the funds provided by the Trust are to be used for specific activities concerning the project. In fact, the Green Trust's guidelines make it very explicit that core support for organizations, and the purchase of "capital equipment" is not eligible for funding.

Similarly to the EU, the Green Trust does however fund the salaries of project officers. In fact, in the case of the *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld*, close to 50% of the total funds of the project are devoted to staff salaries, something that was much appreciated by Indigo, as this policy "took [Indigo] us through these difficult times"¹¹⁴. The Green Trust also funds operating expenses, that with travel, communication and training expenses constitute another large percentage of project funding for the three years lifespan of the project.

However, despite the relative flexibility of the Green Trust, their rules for the use of funds do present limitations with relation to their effects on community participation. The Green Trust describes itself as an initial funder (for a three-year term) that aims to help bold initiatives get underway, with the belief that if the project is good enough (in terms of innovation and performance), other funders will recognize its success and support the project. As good as the relationship between Indigo and the Green Trust might be in this phase of their work with local farmers, a "phase 2" or "phase 3" of the project is very unlikely to be funded, as the Green Trust "only looks for innovative and completely new ideas"¹¹⁵, (see chapter 4). For this reason, it is unlikely to be able to build a long-term relationship with the Green

¹¹⁴ Interview 9

¹¹⁵ Interview 9

Trust, thus not supporting the sustainability of NGO projects that need more than a three-years timespan to show their potential.

Indigo's approach thus does not seem to fit well with the Green Trust's, as it builds its strategy on existing community processes and projects, with a long-term vision. This shows that when choosing to which donors to apply for grants, NGOs face compromises. In this case, it is unlikely that the Green Trust is going to fund a follow up of the same project, as, as seen in chapter 4, one of their benchmarks is to fund always new and innovative projects. It follows that Indigo will have to look to new sources of funding when the Green Trust project will be over.

Despite this shortcoming, the Green Trust stands out for another reason, that is very much appreciated by Indigo. Differently from other funders, the Green Trust does not ask for co-financing, but provides 100% of the funding for a specific project, even though in this case, Indigo can count on other funding sources including the Adaptation Fund Network, the Heiveld Co-Operative (co-operative of rooibos farmers), in addition to the organization's own funds. Funding 100% of projects could be a choice due to the independence of the Green Trust with regard to back donors, as the Green Trust is basically only accountable to its board of trustees. Their independence, together with their practice of selecting NGOs that they already trust, can explain why they take the chance of funding the totality projects without worrying about pooling the risk.

Another policy that Indigo valued is that Green Trust does not seek to interfere with project implementation, as it mostly aims at playing an oversight role in projects¹¹⁶. Both the mid-term project evaluation and statements from Indigo project managers reveal that the program has benefitted from the donors' flexibility, especially during the pandemic, where project officers were allowed to change the destination of funds as previously agreed, and where missed project goals for that specific period were let pass (mid-term report)¹¹⁷. It thus emerges that, while the Green Trust appears directive for what concerns the design phase of projects, with reference to the need to jointly build projects proposals with WWF-SA, once a funding agreement has been reached, the Green Trust does not interfere with the day-

¹¹⁶ Interview 9

¹¹⁷ Interview 9

to-day management of projects, as recognizes in the mid-term report: “Green Trust operates differently in that the project runs independently with very minimal interference. WWF is an intermediary between the funder and the implementer, also with minimal interaction within the project. Mostly plays an oversight role on the project with regards reporting which means less risk-averse (sic)”.

The Green Trust proves to be a complex donor when it comes to conditions over the use of funds that can have an impact on community participation. Presenting itself as a short-term funder, it makes it difficult for NGOs to sustain project results and arrange for extensions beyond the three-year funding period. However, the Green Trust funds 100% of projects, thus removing the burden of seeking multiple funding sources for one project. The Green Trust is also relatively flexible when it comes to the use of funds, as it covers staff salaries and operating expenses. These aspects are considered highly helpful by Indigo’s project managers, as demonstrating that the donor trusts the NGOs to do their job. On the other hand, the Green Trust favors organizations that have had or that are building a collaborative relationship with WWF-SA, thus favoring organizations that already have access to WWF-SA, and that are not necessarily the ones closer to local communities (even though this was the case for Indigo). Individual relationships between donors and funders prove once again key for getting favorable conditions for NGOs.

5.4 Critical Ecosystem Partnership (CEPF)

To disburse funds, the CEPF organizes calls for proposals. The selection process is roughly the same as the EU’s, with the difference that the CEPF considers the possibility for CSOs to apply for *small grants* (under \$50,000), for which no full proposal is required, but just a concept note. All CEPF grants (large and small) are screened against specific social and environmental safeguard policies, designed to prevent or mitigate any harm that might inadvertently arise during the project life cycle (see chapter 4). However, as much as these safeguards are designed to protect vulnerable populations and the environment from unwanted harm caused by projects, compliance with these implies a considerable amount of work for applicant organizations.

Unfortunately, the available information from CEPF's documentation is not sufficient to carry out a thorough analysis of the advantages and limitations of their approach to the use of funds. However, from the available documentation online, it is safe to say that NGOs' use of CEPF funds is strongly regulated. Grantees are required to keep track of the time that their staff spend working on the grant, as for the EU. In this field, the CEPF goes further, asking recipients to additionally keep track of staff time spent on other donors' projects, and not accepting estimates.

The CEPF requires NGOs to ask for approval for any expenses equal to or above \$ 5.000, and in any case, funds can only be used for those activities detailed in the approved grant agreement. However, while CEPF's administrative requirements are, in general, very burdensome, the CEPF also provides a relevant example of decentralization, by allowing small grants (up to \$50.000) to be managed and assigned directly by the single regional teams of the CEPF, that are supposedly embedded in the local context and closer (both from a physical and a social and cultural viewpoint) to local NGOs and local communities).

In terms of duration of funding periods, CEPF does not wish to be a permanent presence in the hotspots, but rather seeks to define and work towards an end point at which local civil society transitions from its support, which generally takes more than five years. Indeed, the CEPF investment period in the Western Cape region continued for ten years from 2002 to 2012, with the last 3 years designed to consolidate the gaining of the first phase ¹¹⁸. Indeed, the CEPF's donor council directed the CEPF to focus on a more limited number of hotspot, but investing for longer periods, i.e. more than 5 years.¹¹⁹.

In this vein, after the end of their investment in the Western Cape, the CEPF decided to prioritize other biodiversity hotspots, as the region had a very well capacitated civil society structure that had things in their hands, and the capacity to carry on their conservation activities, along with and government institutions committed to biodiversity conservation.

¹¹⁸ Interview 5

¹¹⁹ Interview 5

Dhunpath (2004) claims that NGOs should avoid permanence, as it would be detrimental both for NGOs and local communities. The CEPF's approach is in line with this reasoning when applied to donors. Indeed, once the NGO or in this case the donor has achieved its goals, it should pursue new challenges emerged in the context in which they were working or pursue the same goals in different contexts. However, from what has emerged so far, even though many NGOs' wish is ultimately to be considered redundant and not be needed anymore, this generally does not happen in the short time span of a few years. In this vein, if not permanence, NGOs should try and work with a community as long as the community welcomes NGO's support. Consequently, in order to facilitate NGOs in their endeavor to meet local communities' needs, donors should also build long-term funding strategies with them.

5.5 Thousand Currents (TC)

In line with the idea that independent foundations rely on grantees to translate their philanthropic missions into reality and that they explicitly look for organizations with similar visions and missions (Snow 2002), TC's approach to project funding is very selective. TC autonomously selects potential grantees by actively searching for them on the basis of affinity of values. In TC's case, the values they search for in grantees are the ambition to promote the self-determination of local communities and movements in the Global South through initiatives about food sovereignty, climate justice and economic justice. This modus operandi is rare in the donors' realm, as the most common method to select grantees is through competitive call for grants.

However, TC does not open up their funding possibilities to any interested organization, but rather chooses them and trusts them with core and long-term funding. By the means of field trips, online research and recommendations from other grantees, TC approaches potential trustees "that have self-criticism embedded as part of their ethos and organizational culture"¹²⁰, proposing small donations that can grow over the years. The rationale behind this selection approach seems to be that generally

¹²⁰ <https://thousandcurrents.org/what-if-foundations-asked-just-one-question-for-grant-reporting/> last access 7/7/22

organizations spend considerable time and energy writing proposals for funders: “we don’t take unsolicited proposals, but the logic behind that is that groups would spend a lot of energy writing proposals to funders who turn them down. The idea is that we don’t want groups to spend too much time writing proposals that in the end we are unable to fund. So, we try to take away that labor. If you speak to groups you find out how many proposals they write in the years and how many of them end up as funded: that takes so much time away from the actual work”¹²¹. This statement shows that TC does not wish NGOs to spend too much time writing proposals that they would not be able to fund, and thus prefers to autonomously search for potential grantees. However, as already stated, the impossibility for NGOs to reach out to TC causes considerable accessibility problems; in order to be able to get TC’s attention, an NGO must be visible, which entails having a network in place, or at least a website.

Concerning the use of funds, TC represents a rare example of a donor that trusts its grantees, based on a “shared identity and solidarity, common values, group membership, and the feeling of working towards common goals” (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017, 141) As seen in earlier sections, it is common practice for donors to disburse project-funding or programmatic funding. This implies the presence of rules about how money is to be spent by NGOs. This can be problematic for NGOs because, even though project activities and their related expenses have been negotiated and agreed with the donor, the context where the project takes place can change, as the priorities of local communities.

In order to help NGOs avoid these kind of problems, and because of the need for NGOs to be adaptive to the context in which they operate¹²², TC provides core, unconditional funding that grantees can use as they deem appropriate. Indeed, the type of funding provided by TC has no strings or conditions attached. TC chooses to avoid “dictating strategies and activities”, and “trust them [beneficiaries] with the choice of using those funds as they deem most appropriate”¹²³. However, the amount of funding provided by TC to its beneficiaries is lower than the amounts disbursed by the other

¹²¹ Interview 4

¹²² Interview 4

¹²³ Interview 4

donors under analysis, in particular the EU and the CEPF. It follows that TC's risks related to mismanagement of funds are consequently acceptable.

After identifying potential prospective grantees through research, referrals, and site visits, TC begins its relationship with partner organizations through a "catalyst grants program", where they provide \$10,000 of unrestricted funding for a period lasting six to twelve months, so that TC and the partner can collaborate over a short term to assess the potential of a longer-term partnership. After that, if both parts desire to carry on their relationship, TC invites "catalyst partners" to engage in a longer-term relationship¹²⁴.

Besides being unconditional, TC's funding is also long-term, meaning that it is not time-bound. In fact, partnerships between TC and grantees continue as long as needed by the group, or as long as TC have the means to support them¹²⁵. The rationale behind this is that TC grantees' work generally cannot be concluded in the lifespan of a project, and if resources and support are taken away from grantees, years or even decades of work could be jeopardized. In many cases, donors are not willing or do not have the possibility to support long-term work and choose to fund shorter-term outputs and goals that they want grantees to meet. However, this is often not compatible with changes that take a long time to be achieved. If and when a funding relationship with TC expires, or if grantees deem the funding provided by TC no longer necessary for them, they can choose to "stop being a partner" or "transition into senior partners". In this second case, TC no longer financially supports them, but maintain contacts and exchange lessons learned¹²⁶.

The organizations taken into analysis with regard to TC are SPP and SDCEA, who embrace this type of attitude to the use of funds, to the point of wishing that all funders would adopt a similar approach¹²⁷. Moreover, despite the fact that, as anticipated, TC's funds are not as substantial as the EU's, NGOs report that sums disbursed by TC are not yet large but growing¹²⁸. However, a donor that

¹²⁴ <https://thousandcurrents.org/partners/>, last access 21/5/21

¹²⁵ Interview 4

¹²⁶ <https://thousandcurrents.org/senior-partners/>, last access 20/1/21

¹²⁷ Interviews 8 and 11

¹²⁸ Interview 8

adopts an approach that progressive, choosing to completely trust its grantees, and that has limited funds to disburse, has probably to be very careful when selecting grantees, and this can explain their choice of not issuing calls for grants or open calls through which SMOs and NGOs can approach the donor.

5.6 Concluding remarks

All of the funding modalities adopted by the donors in my sample have accessibility issues, with open calls seemingly being the most accessible only because of the absence of strict timeframes to comply with. The findings of this chapter confirm the theory presented in the introductory section, i.e., that short funding timeframes and rigid rules on the use of funding are major problems for NGOs that genuinely wish to meet local communities' needs. This chapter also adds a few new elements. First of all, strict rules in the management of funds, and the impossibility for NGOs to use funds to sustain operating costs have a negative impact on NGOs' ability to deliver to local communities, as suggested by Elbers and Arts (2011) and Andrews (2014). However, although the donors in my sample do not provide core, unconditional funding with the exception of TC, all of them allow grantees to use funds to cover (at least a percentage of) staff salaries and operational costs which NGOs consider vital to keep an organization going. An interesting alternative to overcome shortcoming related to the use of funds, and that is presented in this chapter, is the approach adopted by SCAT, one of the EU's grantees. As an experienced organization, SCAT has proved to having the capacities to undergo the processes to obtain and manage EU funds. However, SCAT is also aware that core funding is the most empowering for local communities, and thus made the choice of issuing calls for grants addressed to CBOs inside and outside SCAT's network to allow them to be assigned a budget for the activities they deem more important for their communities. This process was included in the project proposal and approved by the EU. This shows a possibility to avoid NGOization pitfalls, even when operating in highly regulated funding context such as the EU's.

This also shows that NGOs are far from being passive actors in their relationship with donors. SCAT provides an example of an NGOs "bypassing" donors' rules in order to achieve its goals. To say

it with (Rauh 2010, 43) words: “[NGOs strategies] fall within a continuum that ranges from passive acquiescence to negotiation and compromise, decoupling from inappropriate procedures, and even challenging and rejecting certain donors or donor requirements”. Another example is provided by Green Cape, that, in order to fulfill the requirement of having both a co-funder and a project implementation partner, profits on having a long-term trusting and trusted partner such as the FNF, that appears in both roles, while not having a concrete role in the daily life of the project. NGOs also do have agency in choosing their funders. Within my sample, this is shown in particular by SPP and SDCEA, who only accept funds from politically aligned partners and partners who share their visions and missions, while they do not accept funding from organizations whose work is in opposition to what they seek to achieve. In addition, SDCEA does not accept funding from donors who ask for co-funding as a criterion for selection¹²⁹. Also, when approached by TC, SPP director was reticent in accepting the funds they proposed without getting to know the funder, also because, as a norm, SPP doesn’t accept U.S.-based funding, since it is critical of the role of USAID in land tenure issues in South Africa¹³⁰. SPP is also aware that, when digging deep enough, no funder is necessarily entirely faultless, as donors might in turn receive money from organizations that oppose their views. However, they try to be both pragmatic and faithful to their own ideas by carefully selecting their funding partners¹³¹.

On the other hand, always in the context of EU funding, this chapter has also shown some instances of professionalization “in action”, exemplified by EU grantees such as Green Cape, WWF-SA and SCAT, who hired staff to be specifically employed to carry out the EU-funded project, pointing out the need for specific types of expertise, that might change the nature of NGOs in the long run.

It is interesting to note that all donors (except from the CEPF, that ceased funding South African CSOs long before the pandemic), were found to be rather flexible during the COVID emergency. For example, they allowed grantees to change the destination of some funds to cover costs of internet connections for local communities, so that community members would be able to carry out their work

¹²⁹ Interview 11

¹³⁰ <https://medium.com/@1000Currents/when-surplus-people-project-decided-on-us-c548e6a2d2b3>, last access 13/1/22

¹³¹ Interviews 8 and 12

and studies remotely. This is significant, as many local communities involved in the projects did not previously have access to the internet. Another important concession by donors in pandemic times was to extend grant periods. The enhanced flexibility in the use of funds accorded by donors when a global emergency is ongoing, shows that if circumstances are considered critical enough, donors are actually willing and able to allow some much-needed flexibility to NGOs. This also points to the fact that, conversely, donors might not be as responsive to crises that are just as serious, but that happen locally, as, due to their distance they might not be fully aware, for example, of the effects of a local drought or local political turmoil.

This chapter also confirms that fixed-time project periods are challenging for NGOs, because they do not allow them to ensure the sustainability of the results of their projects, nor to deal with contingencies and unexpected events related to the contexts they operate in, and that that will inevitably arise, as suggested by Delfin and Tang (2008) and Elbers and Arts (2011). Hence, this chapter suggests that providing long-term funding allows donors and NGOs to build relationships of trust, which is found to bring about positive spillover effects for projects' sustainability and NGOs' financial sustainability, and in the long run, provide a way out of NGOization dynamics. Evidence of this comes in particular from TC's and BfdW's approaches and is bolstered by the fact that it was raised as an issue in the cases where these relationships were absent, such as in the EU and the Green Trust's cases.

In addition, when provided with steady sources of funding, NGOs are in a better position to meet local communities' needs and claims in the long run. Again, evidence from this, in a positive sense, comes in particular from the TC and BfdW cases. Indeed, TC and BfdW's grantees claim that long-term funding arrangements allowed them to overcome another aspect that contributes to the NGOization of civil society, that is the projectization of NGOs work, which ultimately ends up determining and changing priority areas of intervention at donors' will (Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Roy 2015). In fact, even though in the case of BfdW the language used is that of project funding, the type of funding disbursed is programmatic, and serves to financing a percentage of the overall NGO strategy. BfdW and TC thus go for a long-term approach, with the result that NGOs are allowed to follow up on previous initiatives (see SPP and AFRA). In fact, BfdW demonstrates that, although

flexibility is limited by upward accountability mechanisms, it is possible to provide the long-term funding much needed by NGOs. Moreover, long-term funding gives NGO and donor professionals the possibility to build personal relationships, with the result of strengthen trust between donors and NGOs (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017; Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2006).

NGOs who benefit from “one-shot” project funding (EU, Green Trust), are well aware that it is highly unlikely that a follow-up of the same project would be funded by the same donors, and build their projects with this in mind. However, NGOs agree in finding long-term funding generally more beneficial both for their work and the sustainability of NGOs work with local communities. Despite these shortcomings, looking at the donors in my sample, the picture looks less bleak than described in the literature, as none of the donors under analysis provides funding for timeframes shorter than three years. However, there is a big difference between having single projects funded for three years or having a percentage of a whole NGO strategy funded. In this vein, the EU and Green Trust’s strategies emerge as short-sighted for what concerns NGOs efforts towards local community empowerment and participation. In the case of the Green Trust, the main reason for not funding NGOs over longer timeframes is that they aim to fund new and innovative projects, in line with their mission (see chapter 4). In Green Trust’s view, NGOs should be able to attract other funders over the three-year funding period. However, if the scale of the problems they face is large and complex, and “requires multiple and innovative solutions”¹³², then there are chances that projects will be funded for a not further specified additional period. Short-term funding is indeed inherent to the Green Trust’s strategy; that is based on identifying projects with its scaling-up potential. The Green Trust’ goal is thus basically to kick-start projects so that they will attract other funders. As for the EU, the reasons for not providing longer-term funding are, although part of its strategy, not clear.

As for CEPF, their attitude towards the duration of funding is not straightforward at first sight. One of the key assumptions of the CEPF is that “short-term grant funding can make significant contributions to overcoming the resource constraints facing civil society organizations”¹³³. Indeed,

¹³² Interview 2

¹³³ https://www.cepf.net/sites/default/files/cepf_strategicframeworkphaseiii.pdf, last access 21/5/21

CEPF declares it does not want to be a permanent presence in the hotspots where they work, but rather should work towards an end where local civil society has “sufficient capacity, access to resources and credibility to respond to conservation challenges”. On the other hand, their experience shows that, usually, this does not happen after just five years of support. In order to make up for “short-term funding”; the CEPF aims at developing long-term visions, that aim at making local civil society “effective and “well resourced” (CEPF Operational Manual). It follows that the CEPF recognizes that their standard five-year funding periods are not enough for grantees to achieve the desired outcomes, but at the same time, the CEPF donors board has decided to deal with this issue by reducing the number of hotspots in which they operate, and consequently the ongoing conservation projects while extending funding periods. This also shows how high-level strategic decisions are, at least in this case, taken by donors’ back donors, thus pointing to the need of investigating decision-making dynamics at higher places in the accountability chain.

In general, this chapter suggests that for what concerns the length and consistency of funding periods, donors adopt two different strategies. One of them implies having a long-term funding relationship with a possibly reduced number of grantees, but at the same time having in the course of the years a substantial impact on their work, and thus most likely helping them meeting local communities’ needs. This is the case of TC and BfdW. Conversely, other donors chose to have more of a kick-starter approach towards their grantees, funding a possibly larger number of CSOs and projects over the years, but having a comparatively smaller impact on their work. This is the case of the EU, CEPF and the Green Trust.

Thirdly, in addition to the problems identified regarding the use of funds, this chapter suggests that the requirement of project co-funding is as a major drawback for NGOs. The criticism does not apply to TC’s core funding approach, nor to the Green Trust and CEPF (who agree to funding 100% of funding for a given project or allow core or programmatic funding), but rather to EU and BfdW’s co-funding requirements. For NGOs, co-funding implies first and foremost investing time and resources in securing other funders. Secondly, it implies complying with funding conditions that will most likely be different from those of the main donor, thus saddling NGOs with additional burdens and affecting

their ability to do their job on the ground. In order to overcome the burden of responding to different donors' requirements, and therefore to have to overcome this problem, if an NGO has the possibility, it can co-fund projects with its own resources, like in the case of AFRA in the framework of its EU-funded project. However, co-funding one own's project is a possibility only for NGOs that are financially stable, and, for this reason, it probably does not apply to newly established NGOs.

It is clear that, to give priority to the possibility for NGOs to meet communities' needs, and to adapt strategies to different and changing contexts requires great flexibility on the part of donors, along with trust in NGOs' capacities. The donors that explicitly talk about trusting their grantees are TC and BfdW, who are also the donors that build long-term relationships with their grantees. Indeed, this chapter suggests that issues concerning the use of funds are largely about trust between donors and NGOs and the actual time and resources needed by NGOs and local communities to achieve the socio-environmental change they hope for. The next chapter digs deeper into the challenges and opportunities of donors' rules for accountability.

6. Assessing “success”: nuisance or empowering practice?

In this chapter, I investigate if and how donors’ monitoring and evaluation (M&E) provisions nurture NGOization dynamics or oppose them. As part of donors’ formal procedures, M&E provisions are a manifestation of visible power; however, M&E procedures are also an expression of donors’ values, since what is evaluated and how depends upon what and whose realities are recognized and what is considered valuable knowledge (Chilisa et al. 2016). Findings show that the donors’ under analysis M&E provisions present several characteristics that can be considered as opposing NGOization: all emphasize the learning function of M&E, as complementary to the upward accountability function, and encourage the adoption of measures for involving local stakeholder in the M&E process. Moreover, most of them leave to grantees the choice of the preferred methods for carrying out M&E requirements; some of them have even demonstrated a certain degree of tolerance to delays and flaws in NGOs reports. However, this chapter shows that the donors under analysis are also subject to the typical problems related to NGOs upward accountability, such as the use of quantitative indicators and log-frames, that are well known for reducing complex social issues into measurable outputs, and to ask NGOs to comply with burdensome reporting requirements (Ebrahim 2005; Gent et al. 2015; Suárez and Gugerty 2016). This is particularly true for the most “institutional” donors in the sample, the CEPF and the EU, who, nevertheless, show reflexivity and self-criticism in this respect, as they acknowledge the burdensomeness of their M&E requirements. However, the strategies they put in place to mitigate this drawback, such as asking grantees to report on qualitative indicators as well as quantitative, making M&E guidelines more accessible, allowing grantees to revise log frames when necessary and the provision of training do not entirely make up for the professionalization, bureaucratization and projectization dynamics caused by their strict reporting conditions. The notable exception is once again represented by TC, who substitutes official reports with “check-in calls” three times a year, where TC staff learns about project progress and grantees’ needs, to let grantees focus on their actual job on the ground. This chapter calls for a decolonization and contextualization of evaluation, in line with (Chilisa et al. 2016) adopting M&E practices that are in line with NGOs their

missions and long-term goals, as informed by the cultures and worldviews of the local communities they work with.

Table 8 summarizes the findings of chapter 6

<i>Practices opposing NGOization</i>	Emphasis on learning	Tolerance with flaws in M&E framework	Choice of preferred method to perform M&E (qualitative-quantitative)	Emphasis on participatory M&E	No official M&E
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, EU, Green Trust, CEPF, TC	BfdW, Green Trust	Green Trust, EU, TC	Green Trust, CEPF, EU, BfdW	TC
<i>Practices leading to NGOization</i>	Quantitative baseline indicators, use of logframes, use of OECD DAC criteria(projectization)	Slow bureaucratic processes (bureaucratization)	NGOs perception of, or self-acknowledged onerous M&E system (bureaucratization, professionalization)		
<i>Donors</i>	BfdW, EU, CEPF	EU, CEPF BfdW	EU, CEPF		
<i>Practices to mitigate NGOization drawbacks</i>	Reporting on qualitative indicators (in addition to quantitative)	Translation of guidelines in local languages, make them user-friendly	Possibility to revise logframes	Provision of capacity-building for M&E	
<i>Donors</i>	CEPF	CEPF	EU	BfdW	

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are activities that define, supervise and measure project results. planning refers to the identification of baseline indicators and objectives against which project outcomes are measured. Monitoring refers to the tracking of information about a project, collected for management and decision-making purposes, while evaluation consists of a periodic assessment of the outcomes, efficiency and impact of a project and is undertaken with a view to accountability and learning (Mueller-Hirth 2012). In addition, M&E mechanisms are designed to ensuring a better tracking of the implementation of the project, the early identification of on-the-ground problems or misconduct, keep the project staff accountable, and produce and disseminate information (Gooding et al. 2018). Designing and supervising the course of a project is necessary, but it does not come without drawbacks:

“the growing importance of M&E seems commonsensical: who could disagree with the need to demonstrate impact and to be accountable to stakeholders. However, viewing the issue from within the logic of M&E neglects an analysis of power: what can be overlooked is not only how such measurements are done and who determines them, but also how their ubiquity enables particular roles for NGOs, shapes values and impacts on organizational cultures” (Mueller-Hirth 2012, 651).

Donors are generally cautious about how to disburse their money, and selection processes do not guarantee that funds are used properly. The exponential increase in the numbers of NGOs in service and fund mismanagement over the decades has caused distrust as well as greater selectivity in the projects and organizations that donors fund (Dhunpath 2004). In addition Najam (1998) identifies other possible determinants of this behavior. In the 1990es, multilateral and bilateral donors were forced to recognize the importance of NGOs and the role they could play in development programs. So, they started to increasingly disburse money to NGOs because of a general disenchantment with the capacity of states to righteously manage large sum of money. In order to ensure the quality of the organizations that were granted flows of aid, donors created rigid mechanisms for monitoring and evaluate how those money were spent, while development professional started to feel overwhelmed.

Previous chapters have underlined the central role of trust between NGOs and donors to create an environment conducive to community participation. With this emphasis on accountability measures created to overcome trust issues (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017, see chapter 5), donors have adopted M&E mechanisms that link NGOs’ and local communities’ activities to specific outcomes, allowing them to assess the success of environmental projects according to pre-selected indicators. However, Following Thrandardottir and Keating (2018), trustworthiness is not an obvious outcome of the accountability agenda, and actors on the ground dealing with complex processes of social change are often faced with the limited relevance of result-based M&E approaches that follow a logic of linearity and control (Van Ongevalle, Huyse, and Van Petegem 2014),

In the last few decades, planning, reporting, monitoring and evaluation have become development activities in their own right that significantly impact NGOs’ logics of intervention and

their positioning vis-à-vis other stakeholders, including the beneficiaries of the projects (Mueller-Hirth 2012). M&E provisions are a relevant demonstration of the power of donors over NGOs, that can influence their capacity to ensure meaningful community recognition and participation in environmental projects.

Indeed, while serving upward accountability, PME mechanisms are sometimes found to be problematic for the accountability of NGOs towards their constituencies, also referred to as downward accountability (Andrews 2014; Ebrahim 2003). In fact, the accountability agenda has the potential to co-opt NGOs' agendas, through what has been defined the reputation trap (Baur and Schmitz 2012): in order to show donors their reliability, NGOs focus on the most provable goals to demonstrate results that are not necessarily coherent with their missions and long-term goals, with the risk of eroding the social base of trust that NGOs benefit from.

So, although designing and supervising the course of a project is considered by most donors as necessary, some studies find that PME processes can prove both counterproductive and dangerous for NGOs' responsiveness to local communities' needs. For Bornstein (2006), such problems can start from the project writing phase, where usually NGOs are asked to develop a set of baseline indicators against which to measure project progress, and continue with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that can involve extensive paperwork and exact adherence to formalistic demands. In the project planning phase, donors ask NGOs to measure project processes against indicators that often have a quantitative nature. This means, for example, that to call the project successful, they need to establish the number of households that are going to adopt agroecological farming practices, or the number of farmers that should be receiving climate-adaptation training, or the number of women within a community that have access to micro-grants. These indicators are certainly useful and necessary for grasping the scope of the project and monitoring its activities. However, when looking at the deeper changes that NGOs want to advance at a social and environmental level, quantitative indicators *alone* risk remaining superficial. Indeed, the great majority of the NGOs under analysis not only have the ambition of achieving environmental goals, but also of tackling socio-environmental challenges that are systemic in their causes. For example, introducing a new practice or technology at the individual farmer or household

level requires the surrounding system to operate differently (Woltering et al. 2019, 4). To illustrate this with an example taken from one of the NGOs under analysis, the Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) techniques that Indigo aims at introducing among farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld (see chapter 2), requires that the whole surrounding environment, made of producers, supply chains, policies and regulations, support or accommodate the adoption of CSA techniques by individual farmers. Addressing such systemic elements entails a mindset that takes into consideration economic, social and political systems that overlap and influence the course of a project.

The solutions adopted to tackle these challenges should take this aspect into consideration, but sustainability and system changes are difficult to measure, monitor, and attribute, and consequently, in order to show progress, donors tend to reward project proposals that have specific and measurable outcomes, compatible with “tick-box type” PME mechanisms (Woltering et al. 2019).

O’Leary (2017) adds that accounting tools, such as performance appraisals and audits, are often only important in terms of the hierarchical oversight of NGO activity. I thus assume that the extensive presence of quantitative indicators aimed at measuring project outputs only can be detrimental to NGOs’ capacity to respond to local communities’ needs.

Next to accountability, another key function of PME practices is learning from failures or documenting and sharing good practices rather than simply assess impact and performance. The learning function of accountability means that events and information gathered during project implementation can be processed and used to set benchmarks for good and bad practices. In this vein, donors should have no interests in punishing failure, for example through revoking funds or adding conditions on funding, as they may inadvertently encourage NGOs to hide their failures and overstate their successes, thus hampering genuine learning (Ebrahim 2003, 818). Donors should thus make accountability mechanisms about capacity building and learning, rather than the sole assessment of success. Indeed, although accountability and learning are meant to significantly overlap, it has been suggested that upward and downward accountability are most likely to clash when donors demand systematic monitoring and reports (Andrews 2014). One of the reasons is that PME practices can be extremely time and resource consuming for NGOs. This can be because of the frequency with which

NGOs are supposed to report to donors, and the formats adopted. What can make things difficult is that NGOs often work with several donors at the same time, and PME formats vary according to different donors, and sometimes they are not adapted to the peculiar circumstances of different contexts and projects (Ebrahim 2003). I thus expect that the presence of extensive reporting and evaluation conditions are likely to deprive NGOs of precious time and resources to devote to actual project-work, and thus be an obstacle to realizing project goals, meeting local communities' needs, and learning from their experiences.

As indicated in chapter 2, there are PME practices that are widely adopted by donors of different size and organizational natures. A relevant example are OECD-DAC criteria based on project and project output *relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact* and *sustainability* (OECD 2019). The widespread use of the same evaluation criteria among donors has the potential advantage of having a harmonizing effect and lessening a NGOs' burden of complying with radically different criteria for different donors. However, the literature argues that such standardized reporting forms do not prioritize project recipient perspectives, and, on the contrary, by reproducing the ways of knowing, values and perspectives of the organizations that create these standards, donors risk exacerbating discourses and narratives that are favorable to them and their agenda, while excluding and devaluing those of project recipients (Massarella, Sallu, and Ensor 2020, 8). To oppose this trend, there are attempts by NGOs and donors to include the voices of local communities both in the planning phase and within the provision of accounts to donors, through participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation (Awio, Northcott, and Lawrence 2011; Unerman and O'Dwyer 2010). With participatory planning, NGOs seek to meaningfully include local communities starting from the planning phases in order to ensure community ownership of projects. In later monitoring and evaluation phases, a stronger involvement of project stakeholders in data collection, reflection, and learning is crucial for building knowledge and understanding how a project is contributing or not to long-term changes (Van Ongevalle, Huyse, and Van Petegem 2014). Participatory PME methods can include participatory appraisals, audio-visual tools, community surveys, and interviews (Jacobs, Barnett, and Ponsford 2010).

It is worth pointing out that, although the co-planning, monitoring and evaluation of environmental projects by NGOs and communities embeds a promise of self-determination for local communities, this is easier said than done. Communities are not static and monolithic actors, and as outlined in chapter 1, different interests and power asymmetries need to be taken into consideration within any type of group. Moreover, issues caused by contrasting cultures and worldviews can arise as well: participatory accountability mechanisms can be at odds with the realities of local communities, especially if participatory mechanisms do not recognize the extant power relationships within local communities (O’Leary 2017). The complexity of the realities that shape local communities are undoubtedly a key factor to take into consideration when studying donor-NGO relationships with regard to downward accountability. However, given the limited means and time to carry out this research, this factor is kept in mind, but not thoroughly explored due to the impossibility of community-level research during the study.

As described so far, the picture of planning, monitoring and evaluation processes seems rather gloomy. However, donors have the power to make PME practices a real learning and empowering tool, as the types of expertise, vocabularies and practices required by different donors give rise to different ways of performing these tasks, for example by diminishing the burden of PME, and leaving NGOs to take decisions as how to best to perform these tasks and how to meaningfully include local communities.

Recalling the central interest of this work in assessing how donor rules impact on community participation, I thus look at donors’ PME mechanisms to assess whether they are only important in terms of oversight of NGO activity or if they also aim at including communities’ voices.

In the rest of the chapter, I individually examine each donor’s provisions for PME, looking at their magnitude, requested formats, methods, and main stated function, in order to assess whether and which donors in my sample facilitate or hinder NGOs’ efforts towards community participation through PME processes. I look at the donors under analysis in terms of their planning, monitoring and evaluation provisions, building on the *Monitoring and Evaluation* and *Eligibility* categories of the content analysis as outlined in the methods chapter (see codebook in annex 2), triangulated by semi-structured interviews to donors’ professionals. The analysis of donors’ accountability mechanisms is integrated with a text

analysis of documentation provided by funded NGOs, specifically project reports, which in turn is combined with semi-structured interviews with NGO directors and project-managers, to assess the perceptions of funded NGOs with regard to the PME mechanisms they must comply with in order to secure donors' funding. Although the analysis is guided by the theory as explained above, other significant elements have emerged inductively.

6.1 Brot für die Welt (BfdW)

For this chapter, BfdW is examined in relation to SPP, specifically with reference to the *Realizing pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty and the improvement of livelihoods* project, and in relation to AFRA, with reference to the *Realizing Farm Dwellers' rights Project* (for more information about the projects, see chapter 2). The case of BfdW has some distinctive characteristics when compared to other donors. First, the two NGOs are long-term partners of BfdW, meaning that they have had a donor-grantee relationship in place for more than ten years. This suggests that a relationship of trust between donor and NGO is already in place, and the donor's attitude may be different compared to more recently established partnerships. Second, the character of the funding is peculiar. As seen in chapter 5, although the language used by BfdW in their documentation is that of project-funding, the type of funding disbursed by BfdW is in these cases closer to programmatic funding. In fact, BfdW does not simply fund specific projects, but rather NGOs' strategic plans that are approved and evaluated every three or five years. This means that funding is more continuous and durable than single project-funding.

For BfdW, the function of M&E is to learn from project experiences to draw lessons and best practices as well as to be accountable, and the findings and recommendations of external evaluators are used to improve both the quality and effectiveness of projects and to further develop their programming work. Indeed, BfdW asks grantees to share their lessons learned during the funding period (SPP,

narrative report). For BfdW, the accountability function fulfilled by evaluation mechanisms is not only directed to donor accountability, but also to the public and the supported communities and groups¹³⁴.

BfdW's framework for PME implies the use of quantitative indicators in the project planning phase for assessing project impacts, albeit recognizing the shortcomings of these¹³⁵. As establishing adequate baseline indicators can prove to be tricky in practice, BfdW also provides training to grantees in this respect.

BfdW asks for linearity in project PME, meaning grantees are asked to reason in impact chain-terms, where an action brings to an output towards a specific goal, while the grantees, especially in the Global South, have a more holistic approach, mainly for “cultural” reasons¹³⁶, and can thus meet with difficulties in aligning with BfdW's approach despite the training. In addition, these types of indicators can be hard to monitor: “if there is a workshop in bio agriculture, the people are trained, and they go back to their farms, then it is difficult to see if they really used it or not”¹³⁷. Some examples of objectives guided by indicators as required by BfdW's framework, drawn from the narrative report of SPP's project *Realizing pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty and the improvement of livelihoods* are: “all producers save seeds and 70% include a process of mapping traditional practices and seed/medicinal plants; at least 5 youth groups, 3 women's groups and 5 farm workers have acquired access to new or additional productive land, services or water as a result of their advocacy and lobbying; local formations / forums organize and actively support at least 6 campaigns for agrarian reform”.

Proposals written by SPP and AFRA and approved for funding by BfdW show that both organizations have met with some difficulties either in identifying baseline indicators against which project results would be measured, or in reporting against them. For example, AFRA met challenges in collecting baseline data about farm-dwellers, because they are privately owned properties and access is not guaranteed. AFRA also met other challenges in relation to the practice of establishing indicators, especially concerning categories that do not officially exist. For example, *farm dwellers* as a category

¹³⁴ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/en/bread-for-the-world/cooperation/evaluation/>, last access 22/4/2022

¹³⁵ Interview 3

¹³⁶ Interview 3

¹³⁷ Interview 3

does not statistically exist for official purposes, in contrast to *farm workers* who are officially recognised (AFRA, Application for financial support). The recognition of farm dwellers as a category recognized by the government is indeed a battle that AFRA is pursuing, but, at the time of writing, engagements with the government have not brought the hoped-for results.

Difficulties in collecting quantitative data are not limited to the planning phase. SPP's mid-term report, for example, shows that both previous reports and the current one failed to adequately document the advancements guided by the indicators set during the planning phase in relation to small-scale farmers, farmworkers and forestry communities' access to land and water and agrarian reform campaigning. SPP declares that project results are being consolidated and will be included in the final report. However, despite the difficulties met by these NGOs in meeting the donor's requirements for reporting progresses, the proposal and the report have been approved. This suggests that there is some degree of tolerance and acceptance by the donor when there are flaws in the PME framework, at least when it concerns long-term partners such as SPP.

As for the criteria that guide project evaluation, BfdW (and indeed the EU, the Green Trust and the CEPF) make extensive use of the OECD DAC (Development Assistance Committee) criteria, with the risks explained in the former section of limiting the voice of NGOs and communities in narrating their impact. However, if the DAC criteria provide a track that NGOs must follow to deliver project PME, the actual methods used to report on progress are chosen by each donor and vary considerably. In the case of BfdW, the NGOs under analysis declare that they report on their own strategies, using the templates that BfdW provides for them. So, while the *types of indicators*, and the *criteria* against which results are measured are dictated by the donor, the methods for assessing the outcomes of a project are chosen by the grantee. For example, AFRA chose to rely on an extensive case management database, that allows them to produce precise statistical updates against relevant project indicators, and where monitoring is performed using GANTT charts, and is reported in monthly meetings with project stakeholders. As for SPP, besides quarterly team meetings, strategy team meetings, review and planning spaces, they integrate participatory action learning techniques into their implementation and monitoring and evaluation plan. The outputs include case studies, videos, individual stories of change, information

sheets, and the sharing of their experiences both through the media or network and alliance meetings and through horizontal exchanges with local communities at market days.

While regular reporting to BfdW is performed by the NGOs themselves, at the conclusion or, in some cases, in the middle of a project, BfdW requires them to have their work evaluated by an external professional in order to ensure independence and objectivity in the evaluation. This is a widespread practice, and costs are generally built into the project budget. Final external audits are also adopted by the Green Trust, the EU and the CEPF. The external evaluator is supposed to be an independent party able to impartially evaluate project results. When selecting external evaluators, BfdW's most important stated criteria are their regional, sectoral and methodological competences as well as their independence. Indeed, evaluation teams are gender mixed and consist of evaluators from the Global North and South. In addition to respecting human rights and the dignity of all project stakeholders, they are also supposed to apply a participatory approach to their evaluation work. Evaluation reports are summarized and contain the key findings and recommendations in line with the OECD/DAC criteria¹³⁸.

This section shows a mixed picture of BfdW's approach to PME with reference to community participation. On the one hand, it makes use of quantitative indicators and OECD criteria, thus pointing to a results-based evaluation model with the accompanying shortcomings outlined in the introductory section. On the other hand, they also highlight the learning function of PME, and the need to be accountable not only to donors, but also to beneficiaries and the public in general. In addition, a degree of tolerance seems to be applied to delays or deficiencies in reporting. Both the NGOs under analysis agree in saying that BfdW's PME mechanisms are helpful for them. For AFRA, for example, because the mid-term and year-end reports give them the opportunity to reflect on whether they are achieving their desired outcomes and, if this is not the case, to review their strategy, which informs their work for the next years. In addition, communication is declared to be straightforward and there is dialogue between donors and grantees¹³⁹. For SPP, BfdW expectations from partners are "what they should be",

¹³⁸ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/en/bread-for-the-world/cooperation/evaluation/>, last access 22/4/2022

¹³⁹ Interview 7

as BfdW leaves NGOs free to define their processes, while the only real requirement is to follow their templates and report on the indicators and objectives that they have listed based on their strategic plans¹⁴⁰.

6.2 European Union (EU)

At the time of writing, with reference to the *Climate Change Champions* initiative, the NGOs under analysis are at an early stage in the implementation of their projects. For this reason, the data about EU PME procedures are limited, especially regarding the monitoring and evaluation procedures. However, some of the NGOs under analysis had previously received EU funding and were able to provide feedback about the EU's PME procedures related to other projects. These organizations are AFRA and Indigo Development and Change.

This EU call is limited to a single project to be concluded in a specific timeframe (three to four years), in contrast to the programmatic funding from BfdW and the core funding by TC. The amount of funds disbursed by the EU for every project (around EUR 600.000 per project) is considered substantial by the NGOs under analysis, and this is one of the main reasons why the EU's PME requirements are self-declaredly demanding. Unsurprisingly, the bigger the amount of funds disbursed, the more the project is scrutinized. As the funds disbursed are considerable, financial mismanagement is punished, for example by interrupting the flow of funds. In worst-case scenarios, projects can be suspended, and organizations excluded from future calls for financial mismanagement and miscommunication¹⁴¹. For these reasons, it is important for NGOs to have a good track record, as previous mismanagement of funds can mean lower scores in project evaluations in the application phase.

¹⁴⁰ Interview 8

¹⁴¹ Interview 1

The EU delegation in South Africa asks applicants to present their PME strategy as part of their full application submission. Indeed, the way that NGOs design project activities and arrange to monitor and evaluate project progress and results is assessed by EU managers in the evaluation grid. The applicants shortlisted to send a full application submit a detailed budget and a logframe matrix with a full result chain that includes indicators, targets, baselines and sources or means of verification for impacts, outcomes and outputs. Logframes have been used for decades to track project progress as they assume a linear logic, provide short and convenient summaries of a project, and encourage project staff to think through the logic of an intervention and identify how a specific set of actions is expected to contribute to longer term impact. However, the use of logframes also assumes that complex social issues can be reduced to one key goal shared by all interest groups, and might not be the best tool for analyzing social processes that involve complex and unpredictable interactions (Jacobs, Barnett, and Ponsford 2010). Still, with all the criticism surrounding the use of logframes, the EU gives grantees the possibility to revise their logframe as necessary and to choose whether the indicators they provide will be of a qualitative, quantitative nature or both, at least as far as the *Climate Change Champions* call is concerned (EU logical framework and activity matrix). Similarly to BfdW, the EU allows grantees to choose their preferred methods to carry out PME processes. Moreover, this type of call is highly oriented to strengthening South African civil society and positively evaluates proposals with in-built participatory monitoring systems that include wider groups of stakeholders.¹⁴²

In the case of the project carried out by AFRA and Indigo, *Innovative partnerships for change: raising new climate change initiatives and champions*, project implementation is monitored by the project team through a process of participatory monitoring, evaluation, reflection and learning (PMERL) which allows discussions to establish whether there is a need to adapt the processes to achieve the intended impacts (AFRA full proposal).

For this call for grants, the flow of funds is conditional on the submission of reports, both narrative and financial, that are approved or refused by the EU delegation project manager. Grantees are required

¹⁴² Interview 1

to report consistently, at least every twelve months, to the EU's delegation project managers. In some cases, when the project is particularly sensitive, quarterly reports are also required¹⁴³. Like other donors, such as BfdW and TC, before COVID the EU project managers used to visit project sites once a year in order to get a better understanding of the reality on the ground. Moreover, communication between donors and grantees is constant and recommendations are issued throughout a project's duration. Like BfdW, the EU also foresees an external evaluation during the last year of the project, where AFRA is in charge of finding "a suitable individual or organization with an understanding of the land and agricultural sectors as well as a working knowledge of climate change" (AFRA full proposal).

The perceptions about the EU's PME mechanisms among the organizations funded by this call are varied. In general, the NGOs in my sample that are closer both geographically and ideologically to local communities (AFRA, SPP, Indigo) agree in saying that despite having well-developed financial, monitoring, reporting, and accounting systems, managing EU funds is onerous and requires particular care. This matches with NGOs' perceptions about the capacity and experience requirements analyzed in chapter 4: the more grassroots-oriented organizations in the sample are the most critical towards EU PME systems, are aware that these processes might be problematic and not straightforward and are mindful that mismanaging EU funds could cripple organizations financially¹⁴⁴. On the other hand, bigger and more institutionalized organizations (WWF, Green Cape) find the EU PME system to be unproblematic.

The learning component of M&E is very much present in the EU guidelines for PME, and, at least on paper, failures in meeting project objectives are considered a lesson in themselves (Application Guidelines). Another problem met by NGOs is that bureaucracy makes the EU funding system difficult to engage with constructively, as the bureaucratic processes are slow and can cause situations where reports sent in the early phases of projects are questioned years later¹⁴⁵. Moreover, NGOs working with local communities are involved in work that sometimes needs decisions to be taken swiftly, that imply

¹⁴³ Interview 1

¹⁴⁴ Interview 7

¹⁴⁵ Interview 7

the need to be ready to deal with unforeseen events, but feedback from the donors is not always immediate¹⁴⁶, thus causing hardships for NGOs and local communities. Unsurprisingly, the EU proves to be a demanding donor where PME mechanisms are concerned, but the available information at the time of writing do not allow a more thorough analysis.

6.3 Green Trust

The Green Trust provides NGOs with project funding for the duration three years. As explained in earlier chapters, the South African bank Nedbank provides the funds while WWF SA supervises the soundness of the projects from an environmental viewpoint. The organization under analysis in relation to the Green Trust is Indigo Development and Change, with the *Sustainable Stewardship with small-scale farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld* project.

In the Green Trust's case, there seems to be a contrast between the official guidelines for PME and the reality on the ground. The PME structure of the Green Trust looks very result-oriented: the Green Trust's project application form focuses on how applicant NGOs intend to measure the success of their projects, by the means of measurable outputs and indicators, as well as demonstrate their uniqueness, that should make a project worth investing in (Green Trust Application guidelines; see chapter 4 for an analysis of uniqueness and innovation). The guidelines also ask applicants to indicate timeframes for demonstrating the success of their projects, expecting grantees to promise tangible and timely results. Where the project investment is larger than R 1 million (Eur 57.000), a *project success evaluation budget item* also needs to be included in the budget (Green Trust Application guidelines). Like the EU, the more substantial the amount of funding disbursed, the more the accountability mechanisms are strict and onerous.

¹⁴⁶ Interview 7

In the case of the project carried out by Indigo, which aims at developing and spreading Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) techniques among farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld, the outputs set for the project are five: the development of at least two CSA techniques; the monitoring and evaluation of the techniques at trial plots; to have at least twenty local small-scale farmers participating and completing the CSA training course, to have a sustainable stewardship program set up and operational with at least fifteen local small-scale farmers and finally having produced an informal article about the opportunities and challenges of CSA in the Suid Bokkeveld. However, in addition to these measurable outputs, the success of the project is also based on whether the needs of the community are met, and whether ownership is taken of the CSA techniques that are applicable for the local climatic conditions. This is assessed through monthly meetings among project managers and officers to discuss and evaluate project activities, with feedback sessions with the CSA students both to adapt the training sessions to address shortcomings or participants' needs more accurately, and as part of the monitoring and evaluation process (Indigo Project Proposal). This shows that, as for the EU and BfdW, the methods to carry out M&E are selected by the executants. In addition to the regular monitoring and evaluation processes carried out by the NGO's staff, most projects have an external evaluation component which is funded by the Green Trust. For this project, an external monitoring and evaluation process is carried out annually to get an independent assessment of the project's progress and success.

From the mid-term report of *the Sustainable stewardship project with small-scale farmers in the Suid-Bokkeveld* project, carried out by an external evaluator, it is clear that, as demanded by the donor, project results have to be evaluated against the measurable outputs outlined above (Indigo, mid-term report). The evaluation framework is built on the OECD-DAC criteria of *relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability*. The evaluation mainly relies on interviews with key informants, in this case the donor and the project managers, in order to review progress against the targets set in the projects' logical framework. However, a fieldtrip to the project area enabled the evaluator to also interview project participants (farmers) and to develop additional indicators and baseline data to understand the perceptions of the farmers. From the mid-term report, it emerges that one of the main objectives of the M&E team is to develop participatory methods to assess the project's

effectiveness in achieving its aims and objectives, implying that in addition to the basic PME framework, there is the need to develop specific initiatives and community-based indicators to assess the satisfaction of the community. Indigo's mid-term evaluation also shows that for them, the success of a project is based on whether "the needs of the community are met, and ownership is taken of the Climate Smart Agriculture techniques that are applicable for the local climatic conditions" (Indigo mid-term report), in line with the aims stated in the proposal.

In light of the analysis of these documents, there seems to be a conflict between the wording of the Green Trust's application template, that reflects their return on investment logic (see chapter 3), for example asking how long the "period till return on investment" will be (Indigo project proposal), and the recognition, in the report, that the type of change that this initiative aims to achieve is not realizable in the lifespan of a single project, but will take five to ten years if agriculture techniques promoted by the project are adopted in the long run. As anticipated, on paper, the Green Trust has a very result-oriented nature, and, at first sight, its PME mechanisms suggest that this approach could hamper the ability of NGOs to build a PME strategy conducive to community participation, as outlined by the theory in above paragraphs. In addition, the Green Trust's demanding provisions could dissuade more grassroots or smaller NGOs from applying for funds in the first place, thus potentially excluding those organizations that are supposed to be closer and more responsive to local communities' needs.

However, in practice, the Green Trust reveals itself to be accommodating towards NGOs' needs and considerate about community needs¹⁴⁷. The Green Trust has also demonstrated its flexibility and understanding during the Covid-19 emergency. In fact, despite some specific project objectives not achieved largely due to Covid-19 (the publication of a booklet, training sessions & monitoring of a number of trial plots), the donor was flexible with deadlines (Indigo mid-term report). Moreover, Indigo staff finds the Green Trust's funding conditions and PME mechanisms to be appropriate and not overly time and resource-consuming¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁷ Interview 9

¹⁴⁸ Interview 11

6.4 Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)

As outlined in chapter 2, the CEPF is a fund that draws its resources from six different donors that have different structures, priorities, and accountability mechanisms. The CEPF ceased to fund projects in South Africa in 2012, and it was not therefore possible to conduct interviews with NGO professionals involved in concluded projects (emails went unanswered or people involved in the project do not work in these organizations anymore). The CEPF's reporting protocol is based on the analysis of the biodiversity and conservation priorities of a given biodiversity hotspot (see chapter 2). In fact, although the motto of the organization is *protecting biodiversity by empowering people*, it clearly has specific conservation priorities (for an analysis see chapter 3).

CEPF grantees must comply with what the donor itself acknowledges as demanding environmental and social safeguards¹⁴⁹. Indeed, guideline documentation is long and complex (see chapter 3). The CEPF has three levels of reporting. The first is the project level, where each project has specific indicators. Once granted funds for carrying out projects, grantees are required to collect data on both biodiversity conservation and civil society building, as well as on human well-being and enabling conditions for projects. Each one of these categories requires grantees to report, for example, on the *number* of hectares of forest protected, of people whose living conditions have improved, of civil society organizations with improved organizational capacities and of laws and regulations with conservation provisions enacted, to cite some examples (CEPF monitoring framework). The second is the portfolio level. The portfolio indicators are connected with the ecosystem profile, and the Regional Implementation Team (RIT) — the local NGOs that constitutes the local references for the CEPF — collects data about the single projects carried out in an ecosystem profile to report on the investments made in a given hotspot. The third level is the global level, where the CEPF measures progress in all four of these interlinked pillars at a global level, to gain a holistic understanding of impact of the fund, through key indicators of success that are identified with the number of critical ecosystems with an

¹⁴⁹ Interview 5

active investment program that involve CSOs in conservation, the number of CSOs that participate in conservation programs guided by the CEPF ecosystem profiles, and the number of hectares with strengthened protection (CEPF monitoring framework). Once selected, grantees are required to follow an online orientation training course to help them understand the financial requirements of their grant.

Within two months after the grants ends, the CEPF requires NGOs to submit a final completion report, with the status of achievement of expected outcomes in relation to the pre-set indicators, and a section where NGOs illustrate any lessons learned from the project, and to indicate whether the NGO has made plans for the sustainability of the project after completion.

In addition to quantitative indicators, the use specific tracking tools with more qualitative indicators is required from grantees at the beginning of projects for the CEPF to be able to measure the effectiveness of their programs in the form of so-called lessons-learned papers, case studies, interviews, articles and videos. Requiring reporting on both quantitative and qualitative indicators should be, logically, a good thing, as it shows that donors demonstrates to value the learning function of evaluation and are willing to learn about the impact that projects have not only on the environment but also the people who live in it, by learning about their stories. However, the addition of specific tracking tools of qualitative character to the already numerous quantitative indicators can make the process even more burdensome.

A positive characteristic of the CEPF's PME in a view of community participation is its stated *adaptive* character to context and circumstances: CEPF indicates that flexibility and adaptability to context is key to meaningful project evaluation. In fact, CEPF invites NGOs to use their own preferred formats for M&E, provided these contain the information the donor deems relevant. CEPF also wishes M&E processes to be participatory and to include affected people, and jointly carry out monitoring and evaluation procedures. However, the information required by CEPF in PME phases is very specific, and the indicators are rather standardized. It is thus not clear to what extent the whole process can be called *flexible* and *adapted to local contexts*.

CEPF recognizes that it imposes numerous requirements that might seem daunting for grantees, and in large part this is so because they are passed down from CEPF donors¹⁵⁰. What CEPF does to try to make things simpler is to translate materials into several languages and write guidelines in a user-friendly manner, with a view to making the numerous administrative requirements and strict reporting conditions less burdensome to grantees¹⁵¹. Unfortunately, in the absence of more recent projects funded by the CEPF in South Africa it was not possible to confirm this claim with grantees' statements.

6.5 Thousand Currents (TC)

As explained in former chapters, TC aims at radically changing the paradigm of grant-making by providing core funding, generally directly to NGOs and SMOs (also informal groups) active in climate justice, food sovereignty and economic justice. TC expects NGOs and movement groups on the ground to know what is best for them and the communities they serve, and it trusts them with funding that is not attached to conditions. As a public foundation, TC has a broad pool of funding support from institutional funders and private donations that gives it freedom and flexibility, with the consequence of being lightened of the burden of being accountable to donors. The organizations under analysis in relation to TC are SPP and the SDCEA.

TC refers to “learning and evaluation” rather than the more common “monitoring and evaluation” label in the everyday life of the organization¹⁵². In fact, TC underlines that evaluations are supposed to be something to learn from rather than a test, they do not propose any standard methods, basically leaving the choice of whether and how to perform reporting tasks to the grantees. For them, the main function of M&E is purely learning and spreading best practices.

Indeed, TC greatly believes in the principle of not burdening NGOs and movements with anything that is not their work on the ground. Reports are thus substituted with “check-in calls” three

¹⁵⁰ Interview 5

¹⁵¹ Interview 5

¹⁵² Interview 4

times a year, where TC staff learn about project progress and grantees' needs¹⁵³. The assumption behind this practice is that grantees should be spending as little time as possible doing administrative work and focus instead on their actual job on the ground. For this reason, TC does not ask grantees to report specifically to them, but rather accept annual reports that organizations write for other funders.

Once grantees are selected (with the accessibility problems explained in chapter 4), they thus gain considerable leverage; in fact, the potential grantee can test the terms of the partnership by assessing whether the donor will accept and endorse the movement as it is or whether substantial changes to their modus operandi will be imposed *if and when* accepting TC's funds¹⁵⁴. For example, SPP "tested" TC by assessing whether TC expected SPP to change the language they use in the documentation, whether TC wanted SPP to refine its objectives or use logframes, and by observing whether TC staff behaved respectfully when visiting SPP in South Africa, as *"if we cannot connect at the beginning of a partnership, this will create more damage than good down the line when funding is then cut"*¹⁵⁵.

Moreover, TC grantees are submitted surveys to assess the level of satisfaction of grantees with the donor's approach. The organizations funded by TC greatly praise its approach, wishing that TC's philosophy was more diffused among donors¹⁵⁶. SPP reflects that being this progressive is the result of being independent, and not having governments or multilateral organizations as higher-level donors.

Such an approach to PME clearly requires a great degree of flexibility and trust and involves risks (see chapter 4 and 5). This is made possible by different elements. First, the trust TC has in grantees, enabled by their grantee selection process, as they select organizations, they research autonomously prior to granting funds. Secondly, their greater independence as a foundation, compared to bilateral and multilateral donors and consequently their limited upward accountability mechanisms. Thirdly, as ideal

¹⁵³ Interview 4

¹⁵⁴ <https://thousandcurrents.org/when-surplus-people-project-decided-on-us/>, last accessed 21/4/22

¹⁵⁵ <https://thousandcurrents.org/when-surplus-people-project-decided-on-us/>, last accessed 21/4/22

¹⁵⁶ Interviews 11 and 8

as TC's PME approach (or lack thereof) might appear, the amount of funds disbursed, especially when compared to the EU's, is small, which makes it possible to take more risks¹⁵⁷.

6.6 Concluding remarks

Monitoring and evaluation rules are a particularly important instrument through which donors shape NGOs action and added to eligibility and restrictions in time and use of funding, it additionally top-down regulates programs and projects. The way projects should be monitored and evaluated, makes them a colonial practice, as it ultimately influences what evaluators should be seeing and paying attention to (Chilisa et al. 2016). Indeed, with the words of Chilisa et al. (2016, 314), "evaluation is about values, and what is evaluated depends upon the realities that are seen, what is considered valuable knowledge, and for whom that knowledge is valuable".

This chapter presents a complex reality of donor M&E systems in environmental projects. The findings confirm that the use of baseline quantitative indicators against which to measure project progress is widespread, even though it is not always found to be adequate to evaluate projects with a community participation component, and is not considered fit to reflect substantial system change.

This chapter shows that baseline indicators can also be hard to identify, as they imply breaking down complex and fluid realities into fixed categories, as shown in particular by the BfdW case. Indeed, even though NGOs professionals ought to be able to verify and measure progress driven by project activities for each specific indicator, the reality on the ground sometimes eludes fixed categories.

This chapter also shows that difficulties in measuring progress can also be caused by cultural differences between NGOs and grantees (BfdW), grounded in different worldviews, local political contingencies (farm dwellers not recognized as an official category, SPP), and hard-to-monitor project

¹⁵⁷ Interview 8

activities (a training session has reached the number of trainees set in the baseline but there is no way to know how and if the target audience employed their learning in their daily farming practices)¹⁵⁸.

Assessing projects through quantitative data is thus burdensome and sometimes inefficient, but this chapter suggests that some donors impose these M&E models on NGOs mostly because they are the most straightforward method to show that the projects they fund are successful, and thus ensure the flow of funds from their own donors. This is particularly evident in the cases of the CEPF¹⁵⁹, that in order to fulfil its many donors' administrative requirements had to come up with a system that satisfies all donors but it is not much burdensome to grantees

It also emerges that the size of the grants plays a role in defining how demanding M&E standards are. The more money a donor puts at an NGO's disposal, the more the donor needs to be sure the NGO is able to manage it. This is the case for the CEPF, the EU and the Green Trust. For example, in my study, the EU is the donor that disburses the most substantial amount of money to NGOs (up to EUR 700.000 for a project over three years). With these amounts of money at stake, and a long chain of upward accountability, a relationship of trust between donors and grantees is unlikely to occur.

Assuming that strict and burdensome PME rules divert NGOs' resources and attention from their work on the ground, with negative consequences on their ability to deliver to local communities (Choudry 2010; Ebrahim 2003), the establishment of small and micro grants, with limited upward accountability rules could be a possible solution to this problem. However, even for small grants PME requirements can be labor intensive and disproportionately onerous compared to the size of the grant offered, and from a donor's perspective, the administrative burden of small granting is much higher. Furthermore, it may be difficult to show how transformational such projects are, when they take place at such a small local scale. In fact, donor reporting requirements that are designed for large projects are not easily downsized ¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁸ Interview 3

¹⁵⁹ Interview 5

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.adaptationnetwork.org.za/2020/04/insights-on-using-small-granting-to-support-local-adaptation-action/> last access 2/7/21

Another problem that emerges particularly in relation to the EU, CEPF and BfdW's PME models is that NGOs often find themselves in a position where they need to take swift decisions dictated by project contingencies. For this reason, they should be able to quickly adjust the use of funds in a way designed to meet local communities' needs. However, in situations where the flow of funds is contingent on the approval of reports, and where the red tape is notably slow, the NGO's need for flexibility is highly compromised. Yet, this chapter also shows that there are instances of recognition of this shortcoming and donors that try to mitigate it. BfdW proves to be tolerant towards grantees' delays in reporting (at least with long term partners), while CEPF provides assistance and training through local branches and tries to provide guidelines in different languages and supposedly in user- friendly ways¹⁶¹.

Similarly, while monitoring indicators and criteria are fixed, the fact of leaving the choice to grantees with respect to preferred methods for performing monitoring and evaluation activities indicates that the donor recognizes that NGOs are better placed to make this kind of choice. This is the case for BfdW, the EU, the Green Trust, and the CEPF.

Several NGOs in my sample, among which AFRA, Indigo, SPP, chose to perform monitoring and evaluation tasks using participatory methods. This is significant if connected to the claim that NGO professionals often consider log frames and participatory M&E as opposites, and as corresponding with quantitative and qualitative data respectively, thus confirming NGOs' preference for participatory methods (Mueller-Hirth 2012, 653).

In addition, in some instances donors demonstrate that they are not rigid and monolithic, but willing to evolve and learn; in fact, over the course of the years BfdW affirms that it has changed and adapted its reporting system and application process to meet NGOs' needs, and this is confirmed by SPP¹⁶².

This chapter seems to confirm the claim that bi and multilateral funds (in this case EU and CEPF) are those with the most unreasonable expectations about "extended paperwork and adherence to

¹⁶¹ Interview 5

¹⁶² Interview 7

formalistic demands” (Mueller-Hirth 2012, 12), while Green Trust demonstrates that it is very attentive to community needs, and TC is even more so.

This points to the fact that evaluation paradigm, as they are now for the majority of (Global North) donors, are not culturally neutral. Finally, it is worth remembering that NGOs do have agency: as shown in former chapters: SPP and SDCEA are declaredly selective about donors, and choose to be supported only by donors with whom they share values (see chapter 5 on use of funds).

7. Conclusions

This study unpacked the black box of the power relationships between donors and NGOs, based on the assumption that NGOs' work is considerably shaped by donors' rules and conditions. Local participation and consistency with local environmental and cultural circumstances can be key to the successful governance of common natural resources (Ostrom 1990), and to facilitating fair, democratic and effective environmental governance. In this vein, my aim was to assess whether and in what way, within a power-laden relationship such as that between donors and local NGOs in the Global South, it is possible to escape NGOization dynamics and favor practices conducive to local community participation underpinned by environmental justice.

NGOs have a crucial role in contributing to this outcome, and make strategic decisions in relation to donor funding to reach their own organizational objectives (Ketola 2016). However, the focus of this work is on the way donor organizations themselves help or hinder NGOs in their local community participation efforts.

As for how donors can help NGOs support the participation of communities, the short answer uncovered in this work would be: by trusting local NGOs and local communities to do their job, and limiting the rules and constraints they impose on them, as they best know the contexts they operate in (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015). Indeed, local NGOs and local communities are best strengthened and empowered when donors step back and let them work for social and environmental change based on their own priorities and situated knowledge.

Yet, rules and conditions are present in every phase of most NGO-donor relationships, and their presence is necessary to show the impact of the funds disbursed, to demonstrate the legitimacy of donors and grantees, and, most importantly, to be accountable to all stakeholders involved in a project. These rules are based on the different organizational priorities and epistemological assumptions donors hold. In this vein, donors' rules for accessing, using and reporting on funds were categorized and analyzed, with the aim of uncovering these differences. Using a comparative approach, I analyzed the provisions

of five donors with different scopes and organizational structures that fund local South African NGOs involved in environmental projects.

The choice of restricting the origin of grantees to a single country was made for two reasons: first of all, to enhance the comparability of the case studies, as the donors in my sample fund projects in several regions of the global South, and secondly, because of South Africa's rich history of environmental activism and civil society work around environmental issues (see chapter 1). The choice to analyze donor-NGO relationships in a single country made it easier to identify case studies within this extremely broad area of interest, by departing from donor-funded environmental projects within a given context.

The data for these case studies were gathered from the documentation available on donor organizations' websites and NGOs' websites. NGO and donor professionals provided additional documentation and engaged in semi-structured interviews to deepen and reflect on the information gathered through the documents. The collected material was then coded and analyzed.

Chapter 3 explored the different rationales for funding. Chapter 4 engaged with the questions of donor accessibility for (different types of) NGOs through eligibility conditions. Chapter 5 tackled the challenges faced by NGOs once they gain funds. Finally, chapter 6 addresses the shortcomings of upward accountability as a means of donors' control over NGOs.

In this concluding chapter, I first reflect on and illustrate the main findings for each of my two research questions and summarize my main arguments. Secondly, I reflect on these central arguments in more depth, considering the contributions this study makes to the literature on development and environmental justice, as well as civil society more broadly. Third, I explore the limitations of the study, and, finally, I suggest some ideas for further research.

7.1 Key findings

With regard to the practices and conditions that facilitate or hinder NGOs in fostering local community participation in environmental projects, numerous insights emerged from this work, though it was not straightforward to evaluate whether a donor's provisions were conducive to NGOization processes or helped NGOs' efforts towards environmental justice, as most may have both advantages and drawbacks. Reflecting on these was also challenging given the absence of input of the most concerned stakeholders, that is local communities as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

Briefly, to conduct my analysis of donors' rules and conditions, I drew on the literature on environmental justice, that prioritizes the recognition of local communities' knowledge and livelihoods, and the importance for them to have decision making power in matters that affect them (Schlosberg 2004; Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez 2018). Donors' provisions that pointed in this direction were considered as likely helping the local NGOs under analysis to promote local community participation in every phase of the project. Conversely, provisions that pointed to NGOization dynamics, namely professionalization, projectization and bureaucratization were considered as jeopardizing NGOs' efforts towards local community participation (Choudry and Kapoor 2013).

Moving to findings, first, they indicate that detecting donors' rationales for funding is a useful analytical step to better understand how donors' priorities influence local communities' participation in environmental projects. Indeed, donors generally have an agenda that they want to realize, (also) through NGOs. In more detail, the discussions presented in Chapter 3 suggest that the best scenario for NGOs is not having any specific issues and goals imposed on them, in order to be able to adapt dynamically to the needs of local communities. Indeed, supporting what the organization is already doing without being directive would be the ideal situation to ensure that NGOs can pursue their efforts towards environmental justice. More specifically, it emerged that when donors impose environmental goals, such as biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation goals, in a top-down way, the people involved in and affected by these initiatives are considered as a means to achieve project efficiency, in line with the findings of Kothari, Camill, and Brown (2013).

This attitude responds to a logic of projectization of environmental issues that fails to appreciate the systemic relationships between social and environmental questions, and that fails to recognize the specific relations that different local communities have with the environment they live in. Following Whyte (2013), relationships between community and environment are complex processes, and not “objects” or “databases” to be drawn upon for achieving certain goals. Reducing complex processes into projects is detrimental, especially when the challenges are systemic as they invariably are in cases of environmental issues, and the national context remains scarred by enormous inequality and historical injustice as is the case in South Africa. By way of example, one project used to inform this work is carried out by the SPP to provide agroecology training to farmers and bolster adaptation to climate change. The goal is to create awareness of agroecology as a climate mitigation measure not only among farmers, but also at the government level, and at the same time to pursue farmworkers’ human and constitutional rights, including a gendered dimension. These complex and overlapping issues and aims point clearly to the fact that they can only be tackled systemically.

In order for donors to avoid reducing such complex issues by fragmenting them in “siloed” projects, they should allow NGOs flexibility in the scope of their projects and in the use of funds. Indeed, it emerges from chapter 3 that a virtuous practice for donors would be not to impose specific environmental results to achieve, but rather to leave it to NGOs and local communities to identify their priority issues related to the use of natural resources and the best-suited solutions.

Funding choices guided by global goals, such as SDGs, are also found to be detrimental to local community participation, as compliance with objectives related to global goals can be challenging, especially for organizations that are not used to framing policy arguments at such a scale, and because of the complexity of the issues that the NGOs under analysis are working on. In this vein, they can be considered an unnecessary burden and a top-down imposition of a donor agenda. However, even though most donors (with the exception of Green Trust), do mention and base their overall strategies on SDGs, the documents analyzed here generally stop short of making formal requests for NGOs to specifically

report on contributions to them. In the one case where this was requested, the task is directly performed by donors themselves (CEPF).

Chapter 4 shows that to whom donors' funds are accessible to is another determining fact that helps to explain how and if donors facilitate or hinder NGOs in their local community participation efforts. Small, local and grassroots organizations are generally geographically, and often ideologically, closer to local communities, and thus found to be more responsive to their needs (McNamara and Buggy 2016; Andrews 2014). It follows that, with the aim of facilitating local community participation, funds should be readily available to them. However, this is not always the case; the work presented here shows that most of the donors studied, especially the larger ones, set specific and demanding conditions for accessing funds, and require, for example, documented capacity and experience from NGOs and the individuals that compose them.

Eligibility criteria based on strict capacity and experience requirements resonate with the professionalization argument brought forward in the NGOization idea, which underlines that only certain kinds of knowledge, specifically managerial capacities, are valued by donors. This knowledge is also usually drawn from western approaches, and generally dismisses other kinds of knowledge that are built on the ground or through social struggles (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). Having to demonstrate the managerial and technical capacities to administer projects, and the duty to narratively and financially account for the funds they receive, can represent a big obstacle to young and/or grassroots organizations. Indeed, they do not usually have the capacity and experience requirements demanded by most donors. Problems related to accessibility are not limited to professionalization. Chapter 4 shows that in order to access funds, NGOs also need to be "visible". This is illustrated for example by TC's method for selecting grantees: in no way can grantees approach the donors (either through open calls or calls for grants).

It appears that professionalization mechanisms thus lead some donors to privilege certain kinds of knowledge, and to expect these to be reproduced by NGOs. This connects to another element helpful in explaining how donors influence community participation in environmental projects, which also influences the degree of accessibility of funds: donors' understandings of innovation. Proposing a

project that has elements of innovation, or being an innovative NGO—whatever this is taken to mean—is a near ubiquitous requirement. Chapter 4 shows that donors have, broadly, two different ideas of innovation. One understanding of innovation refers to the uniqueness and newness of project ideas, a selection criterion generally enforced to avoid the duplication of efforts. The requirement of coming up with new and unique project ideas, where sometimes tried and tested approaches have proved effective and would benefit from additional rounds of funding to be refined, has been labeled an “obsession with innovation” (Seelos and Mair 2017). This understanding of innovation makes it hard for NGOs to sustain efforts over the long term, pushing them to continuously come up with something new in order to secure funds.

The alternative understanding of innovation that emerged from my analysis refers to valuing local knowledge and expertise through stakeholder involvement, and trusting that local stakeholders are those best suited to respond to local environmental challenges in the ways they see fit. The analysis of the innovation requirement thus shows how an apparently minor element for explaining donors’ behavior ultimately tells us much about the extent to which donors are eager to delegate decision-making power to local actors, a fundamental condition for the participation and self-determination of local communities with a view to environmental justice.

Chapter 5 explores the rules on the use of funds, and shows that a certain degree of flexibility in the use of funds on the part of donors is necessary for ensuring that local communities’ needs are met and respected. Contexts and community needs (chapter 5) are always changing, and this is the main reason why NGOs need flexibility in the use of funds. Once selected, NGOs face requirements to comply with rules on the management of funds, including constrictions on using funds for operational and administrative costs, making it particularly challenging to deal with contingent needs and emergencies. If NGOs have to ask permission through rigid and formal rules for every expense that has not been previously approved, and donors are not responsive enough, NGOs in turn cannot respond to community needs. However, the donors under analysis, even the ones considered the most “rigid”, allowed “unscheduled” activities to be carried out during the COVID crisis, and this flexibility was key

to NGOs to be able to help local communities in an emergency situation. This point is further discussed in section 7.2.

The lack of flexibility in the use of funds contributes to the NGOization process referred to as projectization, which can be seen as the opposite of core funding in that it reduces complex issues to time and resource-bound projects, with deliverables and “glossy reports” used to document successes (Malik and Rana 2020). Long-term funding, on the other hand, can offer the stability needed by NGOs to build and maintain knowledge about a given context and issue, the ability to undertake long-term planning, and ultimately the ability to remain faithful to their original mission and accountable to local communities. Indeed, long-term and core funding allows NGOs to direct the use of resources to project activities and operations rather than to the preparation of funding proposals and donor reporting.

It could be posited that long-term funding relationships are a potential cause of serious dependency problems for NGOs; however, the picture that emerges from my study is more complex. Long-term NGO-community relationships can be problematic, while the redundancy of an NGO for a local community is a key plank of empowerment, even though this is a very contested and elastic concept. Indeed, many NGOs, for example SCAT, name the independence of local communities from their support as one of their primary objectives, as the redundancy of NGO support implies that the local community has achieved its self-assessed goals, or acquired the means to achieve them autonomously. In the same vein, Hofisi and Chizimba (2013) note that projects are more sustainable if their design has in-built exit strategies and capacity building programs for beneficiaries from the outset, also in order to avoid creating any dependency on supporting NGOs.

There seems to be a clash between the need for long partnerships and sustainability and the need for NGOs to avoid causing local communities to become dependent on their resources. From the limited outlook emerging from this work, the best strategies to adopt are contingent on single cases. To take one of my case studies as an example, in the case of SPP and the farm dwellers they work with, it would make little sense to have a clear and defined exit strategy, as their objective is long term and multilayered, and implies social environmental and political ramifications that cannot be foreseen in the short term. On the other hand, it might make sense to envision exit strategies where NGOs are engaged

in projects related to, for example, the creation of environmentally sustainable businesses, as these are initiatives that should be self-sustaining in the long run.

One clear finding in this work is that it does not point towards long-term donor-NGO relationships as problematic. Following the reasoning explained above, when an NGOs' work is concluded in one community, there will be another issue or another community in need of support, and in the meantime their strategy will have evolved to meet new needs. In conclusion, a long-term relationship between donors and NGOs has several benefits for local communities' participation, as it gives stability to NGOs, creates relationships that approach partnerships, fosters trust, and also facilitates contamination, as it allows NGOs to influence donors' strategies and agendas in the long run.

On a final note, the literature on the problems created by bureaucracy and accountability for NGOs is rich, and is arguably the aspect of NGOization (limited to donor-funded projects) most comprehensively covered in the literature (see for example Massarella, Sallu, and Ensor 2020; Mueller-Hirth 2012; Ebrahim 2003). The burdensomeness of traditional monitoring and evaluation procedures has been largely covered in chapter 6. First, the issues to be tackled in a project are generally identified via baseline monitoring indicators. Chapter 6 shows that baseline indicators can be hard to identify as they imply breaking down complex and fluid realities into fixed categories. Indeed, strict and burdensome monitoring and evaluation rules are well known to divert NGOs' resources and attention from their work on the ground. In addition, this work also identifies co-funding requirements as problematic. Indeed, for NGOs, co-funding mostly implies investing time and resources in securing other funders, and in complying with yet another set of funding conditions that will most likely differ from those of the main donor, thus loading NGOs with additional burdens and affecting their ability to do their job on the ground.

For donors to realize a fairer upward accountability strategy it would be necessary to adapt the burden of monitoring and evaluation to both the projects and the types of NGOs involved. This work shows that this has been achieved, at least partly, as most of the donors analyzed leave NGOs free to choose their preferred method of monitoring and evaluation. However, there is no silver bullet regarding management approaches that enable the achievement and measurement of social and environmental

change. The findings suggest that what is needed are approaches to develop indicators and monitoring and evaluation systems that can be modified during the course of the project, but that at the same time satisfy the donors' needs for measuring performance and learning.

As Shutt (2016, 12) puts it, "the relational work of constant negotiations requires time and mutual trust, which are hard to achieve when political pressure means many traditional donors have to appear transparent and able to manage risk". Indeed, the kind of change identified as necessary on the basis of this work suggests a complete re-evaluation of the rules behind aid policy is key. Especially in environmental governance, country-level and local level realities can change quickly, which makes trust among stakeholders an essential requisite for working in rapidly and unpredictably evolving scenarios. This implies, that donors must trust in the judgments, perceptions and actions of NGO staff (Honig and Gulrajani 2018). In this vein, Chilisa et al. (2016), call for a decolonization and indigenization of discourses about accountability mechanisms in order to locate local voices in the debate on culturally relevant evaluation approaches. This would mean abandoning OECD/DAC criteria in favor of culturally appropriate and context-specific evaluation.

In conclusion, what donors can do (and what some are already doing) to facilitate NGOs in fostering local communities' participation is to give them time and flexibility in the use of money and in accountability choices, and to make sure that their funds are also accessible to small and less-resourced organizations. This cannot happen without a certain degree of trust between donors and NGOs, and in order to build trust, in turn, project stakeholders at all levels need time to build bonds and personal relationships.

Indeed, as suggested by Mueller-Hirth (2012, 13), personal ties mediate relationships between NGOs and donors everywhere, but especially in contexts with a history such as South Africa's. Indeed, as seen throughout this thesis, some of the NGO-donor partnerships under analysis (for example SPP and BfdW's) date back to the fight against apartheid, meaning that the two organizations share a history of struggle. This long relationship developed in a period of crisis and struggle has cemented the trust between the two organizations, positively influencing project outcomes.

Table 9 summarizes donors' practices that facilitate or hinder local communities' participation

Research question	Key findings
<p>What donor practices and conditions facilitate or hinder NGOs in fostering local communities' participation in environmental projects?</p>	<p>Facilitate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition of power dynamics - Core funding - Long term partnerships - Supporting NGOs extant strategy - Context-specificity - People first <p>Hinder</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - imposition of agenda - short term goals - professionalization - environmental goals over people - burdensome M&E requirements

The question of whether different types of donors can contribute to shape NGOs' efforts towards local community participation in different ways has been addressed at different levels throughout this thesis. To my knowledge, this question has never been explicitly posed in the literature apart from comparisons between bilateral and multilateral aid (see Findley, Milner, and Nielson 2017; Gulrajani 2016) and is tricky to answer. The typology presented here is by no means exhaustive or representative of the complexity of the universe of donors, and the small number of cases and interpretive approach do not allow generalizations by any means. However, this work presents some suggestive evidence that the different organizational characteristics of donor organizations do have weight in shaping the ability of NGOs to promote local communities' participation in environmental projects.

In substance, this work confirms the findings of the literature, that bilateral (usually northern) donors are the most directive and hold the most excessive expectations with regard to bureaucracy and paperwork, as well as capacity and experience requirements (Mueller-Hirth 2012). The literature that addresses the characteristics of bilateral aid (see Biscaye, Reynolds, and Anderson 2017; Findley, Milner, and Nielson 2017) finds bilateral aid to be (excessively) political. Indeed, bilateral aid is tied to donors' foreign policy agendas, which are believed to be driven in turn by their political interests, thus

raising questions about its independence. In addition, bilateral aid has been associated with problems related to its tight rules, red tape and excessive bureaucratization.

To be able to manage substantial amounts of bilateral funding, the NGOs in my sample had to professionalize, and even hire new, specialized staff for the purposes of a project (see Green Cape). As seen in chapter 3 and 4, through professionalization mechanisms, donors end up valuing only certain kinds of knowledge (which is shown by donors judging NGOs on the basis of their managerial capacities), while dismissing others.

However, this work also pointed out some exceptions in this regard, and bilateral donors can show their appreciation of local knowledge in alternative ways. The EU has an understanding of innovative projects as “innovative partnerships”, thus valuing local knowledge through the involvement of stakeholders that do not usually access EU funds. Indeed, despite the high competition for accessing EU funds, in the sample, the EU is the only donor that actively fosters partnerships among NGOs. In comparison, non-governmental donor organizations, (TC; Green Trust) are much less constrained, as they are basically only accountable to their boards.

The financial independence of foundations can foster innovation, allowing them to take risks that bilateral donors may be unwilling to take and to invest in projects that only produce results in the long-term. In addition, the commitment of foundations to addressing very specific problems and their ability to make investments independently of political constraints can facilitate the creation of long-term relationships with grantees. The Green Trust, the corporate foundation in my sample, has been tricky to analyze, and it seems to elude fixed categories. It was founded by a bank, and has a return-on-investment logic, a clear agenda and monetary ambitions. However, the reality on the ground seems to be different. The conditions imposed on NGOs are scant, and NGOs are happy with this funder’s overall approach. Moreover, it is a local donor, the only one in the sample. As a local organization, it seems to pay more attention to the NGOs’ embeddedness in the context rather than their professionalization, (see chapter 5), in line with the findings of Suarez and Gugerty (2016) and Bougheas, Isopi, and Owens (2012). It also seems that local donors implement fewer selectivity criteria when allocating funds. Indeed, the Green Trust’s conditions are scant, and guidelines are agile and short. What is more of

importance to them is how well-connected NGOs are locally and the geographic location of the NGO, thus showing that they prioritize NGOs' ability to access beneficiaries.

As for BfdW, the extent to which its religious character influences its practices was not possible to determine with this thesis. However, the NGOs that work with this donor do not seem to see it as a problem at all. Despite being a non-governmental donor, BfdW receives funding from both the German government and the EU, which influences its practices at least to some extent as there is a considerable amount of accountability pressure from its donors. However, through long-term and programmatic funding, and their focus on people, BfdW proved to be a responsive donor to its grantees, and a donor that has been shaped by NGOs in its practices and in its evaluation formats over time.

All in all, it seems that independence from donors' constraints is the first key determinant for not imposing an agenda on an NGO. This is exemplified by TC, which funds its grantees' activities without any impositions. The independence of the donors themselves is also important for the accessibility of funds to grassroots organizations (if you do not have to comply with upward accountability constraints, you can fund whoever you want), for allowing flexibility in the use of funds, and for adapting monitoring and evaluation to local contexts and needs. Different donors thus have different impacts, and non-governmental donors seem to have the best impact for NGOs wanting to foster local community participation in environmental projects for these reasons.

Indeed, TC stands out as the best example of an organization that facilitates local communities' participation, basically because besides disbursing funds, it does very little (see Edwards 2009; Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015) which secures a range of positive consequences. TC imposes no conditions for accessing funds, nor conditions on the use of funds or accountability. As underline numerous times, however, TC represents an exception in the donor sector, and even among foundations. TC's whole model is based on the fact that once trust is established with an organization, that organization should be left to do what it knows how to do. Though only the NGO recipients of TC grants were analyzed, the sample including both grassroots, community-based organizations as well as social movement

groups such as *Abahlali baseMjondolo*¹⁶³, a shack dwellers' movement in South Africa which organizes land occupations, builds collectives, and campaigns against evictions, and that is generally does not accept donors' funding, with rare exceptions, among which TC¹⁶⁴.

A recent article by Ahmad and Khadse (2022) takes important steps in this direction, unpacking TC's core elements: first of all, this kind of model is only applicable to "value-based" funders that have the willingness to give greater power and agency to beneficiary communities as an end in itself. In practical terms, in order to avoid imposing agendas on grantees, TC seeks funds from family foundations and institutional funders willing to provide finances that, in turn, allow TC to provide unrestricted, long-term grants to its grassroots partners. TC "cultivates its donors", making funders recognize how valuable TC's approach is. This allows TC to also make risky investments that most back-donors would not agree to. Secondly, in order to minimize the drawbacks related to their distance from the beneficiaries, TC recruit staff and board members from or with connections to the communities in the Global South that it works with. Finally, for TC trust-building efforts with local communities in the Global South is based on strong personal relationships between staff and partners. A model such as that of TC also requires reflexivity about the possible growth of the foundation. Indeed, if it intends to expand its efforts and broaden its grantee base, TC should also find ways to maintain deep relationships with every grantee while scaling up.

7.2 Main arguments of the study

Based on the findings of this work and the reflections above, I put forward three core arguments about how donors reproduce or avoid NGOization dynamics, and therefore hinder or help NGOs' efforts towards environmental justice.

First of all, to be in the best position to build relationships with NGOs that contribute to realize environmental justice, donors need to trust the local NGOs they fund and the communities they work

¹⁶³ <https://abahlali.org/> last access 5/7/2022

¹⁶⁴ <https://abahlali.org/taxonomy/term/donors/donors/>, last access 22/9/2022

with. In the context of donor-NGO relationships, where donors' power over NGOs is embodied in donors' rules and conditions, a relationship of trust between donors and NGOs requires a decolonization of donors' knowledge, and a legitimization of local knowledge systems. Whyte (2020) points to the necessity for trust and reciprocity between NGOs (among other actors) and local communities to achieve environmental justice. What I am underlining here is even more complex, because it points to the need to extend trust to NGOs-donors relationships.

This requires donors to legitimize local NGOs and local communities' work, by providing financial and capacity-building support when required, and at the same time by "doing less" in accountability matters. In other words, donors should take a step back and avoid burdening NGOs with bureaucratic assignments and funding constraints, and recognize that local knowledge is that best suited to address local problems (see Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015).

This might appear contradictory, as accountability mechanisms such as monitoring and evaluation provisions are specifically designed for donors to be able to trust their grantees. Within the framework of donors' rules, northern, bilateral donors' accountability measures especially are thus interpreted as a means to achieve a relationship of trust with their grantees, which, as seen before, is a prerequisite to achieving environmental justice in donor-funded projects. However, the literature on NGOs is clear in stating that the adverse effects of top-down imposed accountability practices are considerable (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017; Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Ebrahim 2005). It follows that trust should not be based on expectations built on prior experience or reporting information. Trusting grantees requires donors to call their epistemological assumptions about trust into question, and embrace a view of trust based on the recognition that the knowledge systems of others could be a better fit to meet particular challenges, and that the skills of local NGOs and the local communities they work with might be better placed to address local problems, or at least in a manner complementary to the skills of trained professionals. This argument thus reinforces the finding in the existing literature underlined in chapter 1, that is that NGOization dynamics and ensuing problems are the results of epistemological injustices perpetuated by powerful actors, based on a colonial understanding of donor-NGO relationships.

As seen in section 7.1, this work includes examples of donors trusting their grantees, and these are especially found within the category of non-governmental donor organizations. However, examples of trust are not restricted to progressive foundations. Although it does not embrace the principle of trust as devolution of power in a comprehensive way —as its accessibility and accountability conditions are particularly onerous— the CEPF, a big, institutional donor, demonstrates that it is possible for such donors to take steps in this direction by choosing to decentralize decision-making power over grants by passing on the management of small grants to local implementation teams (see chapter 5).

Moreover, the findings show that if donors have a connection with NGOs that is based on a shared mission and core values, they are more inclined to trust these NGOs even at the beginning of their relationship, and to build a dialogue and long-term commitments. Sharing the same spirituality can also help with building personal relationships between NGOs and donor professionals, which in turn helps to build trust and long-term relationships. In turn, long-term relationships and strong and personal ties clearly help to build bonds of trust between donors and NGOs. For example, the BfdW case shows that by building long-term trusting relationships with grantees, it became eager to accommodate the claims of NGOs and adjust its practices and conditions (see chapter 3).

Yet, more than anything else, and as shown by TC’s approach to funding, trust is first and foremost a choice that donors make that is, after all, a political statement about the neoliberal colonial system perpetuated by mainstream funding. TC’s “total trust” approach can certainly lead to failures and instances of mismanagement from NGOs. However, as a member of TC staff put it: “it is inevitable that there will be those [grantees that broke agreements based on trust]. But it is a political choice to say: should that happen, the fear of that is not enough to deter or to make us put restriction on partners in order to avoid that”¹⁶⁵.

My second argument is that to trust their grantees, donors need to be receptive and self-reflexive. Chapter 3 shows that donor professionals do reflect about the power they hold over NGOs, and that, in some cases, they actively take action to mitigate the consequences of this. Donor professionals’ self-

¹⁶⁵ Interview 4

reflexivity is particularly clear in some examples of the consequences of their rules and conditions. The donor professionals interviewed are deeply aware that making their funds available to small and grassroots organizations would be important to enhance local community participation. They are also aware that the burdensomeness of their eligibility and monitoring and evaluation criteria restrict access to their funds to professionalized organizations. As seen in chapters 3 and 4, some donors, such as the EU and BftW, try to mitigate for this drawback by allowing professionalized organizations to fund and train “third-party” grassroots organizations (even though this might cause, in turn, their own professionalization). In addition, BfdW disburses programmatic funding to long-term partners under the name of project funding, while TC chooses to eliminate formal eligibility and monitoring and evaluation provisions altogether. However, the fact that individual donor professionals recognize these drawbacks, but the measures taken to counter them are far from radical (except for the TC case), show that the problems linked with donors driving the NGOization of civil society are in large part systemic and tied to the result-based, neoliberal mechanisms that also pervades the aid system. Indeed, donors themselves are subject to upward accountability mechanisms from the governments and international organizations that fund them (see chapter 5), and it is foundations such as TC, that are basically only accountable to their boards, that demonstrate the efficiency and feasibility of “alternative” funding models.

However, in light of this, the picture might be less bleak than it is portrayed in the literature, and the very existence of organizations such as TC is the proof. We can thus broadly say that among donor professionals, there is evidence of an acknowledgement and reflection on the shortcomings of their organizations’ funding models, and a wish to address them. In conclusion, the existence of alternative funding models, such as TC’s, that has been growing for years, is to be considered an encouraging factor, and demonstrates that donor organizations are able to change and evolve to meet local needs and adapt to ever-changing contexts.

My third point is linked to more scant evidence, but nevertheless evidence that suggests that when NGOs are acting within periods of crises or great political unrest, donors are more eager to adopt practices that counter NGOization dynamics. The NGOs under analysis agree that during the COVID

emergency their donors were generally more flexible concerning the use of funds (funds could be used to address the priorities of the moment) and reporting deadlines. Even though this is not directly connected to environmental governance, the same was true for donors funding NGOs during the fight against apartheid, where very few conditions and restrictions were put on funding (Habib 2005), as keeping records could lead to organizations being exposed to the attentions of the state. even the EU applied an easy approach to working with organizations in order to accommodate local demands (Kabane 2010). More research should be carried out to prove this point; however, this could suggest that the presence of an international crisis, or the perception of the “seriousness” of the issue at stake could push donors to be more trusting towards the organizations they fund, and that in general, a greater political awareness could change donors’ conceptions about trust. This appears to be a possibility for environmental governance in particular, as more and more governments, as well as international organizations, recognize the serious urgency of transformative action, as pointed out by both expert groups involved in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)¹⁶⁶, and Intergovernmental Panels on Climate Change (IPCC)¹⁶⁷ reports.

On a final note, the NGOs under analysis were all successful in entering the space constructed by the donors under analysis. Some of them started out as grassroots organizations, but in time have acquired the capacity to access donors’ funding and to be accountable to them, sometimes with a critical eye. Indeed, as claimed by Elbers and Arts (2011), AbouAssi (2013), Lacruz et al. (2019) and Ketola (2016) among others, NGOs do have their own plans and strategies for funding their projects, and when applying for funding from a specific donor, they know exactly what the pros and the cons are. In this work, this is particularly evident in SPP’s and SDCEA’s approaches, who, as long-established organizations, carefully select their donors on the basis of affinity of values. However, it would have been valuable, for the scope of this work, to assess the opinion of NGOs that applied for funding from the donors that constitute my case studies, but without succeeding. This would have brought precious insights about the obstacles NGOs faces when applying for funds.

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/16b6/e126/9d46160048cfcf74cadcf46d/wg2020-03-inf-11-en.pdf> last access 22/10/2022

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/> last access 22/10/2022

7.3 Contributions to the field

This work contributes to a framework for the study of power asymmetries in donor-NGO relationships as well as contributing to expand the conceptualization of environmental justice.

First of all, I have unpacked the black box of the power-laden relationships between donors and NGOs and referred to them as the result of donors' situated and contextual knowledge. The research takes donors' rules and conditions that regulate their relationships with NGOs as the sites where donors' situated understanding of environmental justice resides. As donor-NGO relationships shape NGOs' work, I delineated a framework to identify what specific rules and conditions bear a specific understanding and consideration of local community participation as embedded in environmental justice.

Secondly, I have sought to build a framework to observe how donors' power is exerted through funding rules, and thus, how it shapes NGOs' spaces for action. This contributes to the aim of developing middle-range theory "close enough to observed data to be testable and abstract enough to inform systematic theory development" (Bryman 2012, 644). As my interpretive approach does not allow generalizations to be made, or indeed does not see generalization as a feasible endeavor, on the basis that we cannot claim that what is the case in one place or time will be so elsewhere or in another time, such research needs to be conducted case by case. However, although the results of my research are not generalizable, the framework is replicable and transferrable to other contexts.

Thirdly, this work advances an innovative way to study donor organizations as powerful development actors in two ways. First, to date, works that include the investigation of donor organizations are mostly single case studies (see for example Wood et al. 2016; Uddin and Belal 2019; Reith 2010). Assuming that donor organizations vary in their organizational structures and their *raison d'être*, I adopted a comparative perspective and built a typology of donors in order to identify distinctions and similarities in the way the meanings related to procedural environmental justice are constructed in the rules and conditions that regulate their relationships with NGOs. Indeed, this thesis

offers an innovative categorization of donors based on their organizational structures and their rationales, thus establishing a comparative model.

Second, studies on donors generally tend to take into consideration single aspects of donor-imposed practices and conditions, such as accountability or eligibility criteria (Uddin and Belal 2019; AbouAssi 2013; Mueller-Hirth 2012). By taking into analysis several “stages” of the funding cycle (before-during-after), this study adopts a holistic approach to the study of donors as organizations, to acquire a more comprehensive picture of the different ways in which donors’ rules shape NGOs’ action.

This study also opens new avenues for the application of the NGOization theory. This was done by taking NGOization dynamics as a product of neoliberal ideologies that inform donors’ development policies, and a process nurtured by epistemological injustices that value western knowledge as a universal truth. While NGOization literature implicitly takes donor organizations as agents of the neoliberal economic system, up to now, no attention had been paid to systematically observe how donor organizations shape NGOs’ work through their rules and conditions, and how these rules can, in fact, foster specific NGOization processes or counter them, and which types of donors are linked to which of these. In this vein, I also tested the possibility of applying NGOization as an analytical framework for evaluating donors’ rules and conditions, by unpacking the argument into its components (professionalization, projectization and institutionalization/bureaucratization).

In the same vein, this research contributes to expand the conceptualization of environmental justice. First of all, it adds to the scant literature that applies environmental justice to donor-funded projects (Mahlanza, Ziervogel, and Scott 2016; Blaikie and Muldavin 2014; Massarella, Sallu, and Ensor 2020), an important contribution since to date environmental justice is mostly applied to the study of contentious movements and politics. Secondly, while the literature on environmental justice conceptualizes it mostly as discourse (Schlosberg 2013), as an organizing frame (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010), as a movement (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016), and as a critical approach to socio-environmental analyses (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020), in this work I take environmental justice as a concrete outcome in its procedural dimensions. Though environmental justice is actually achieved on the ground, I approached it from afar, analyzing the relationships that contribute to create the structural

conditions for environmental justice to be realized or not in donor-funded projects. To do this, I derived some of the factors leading to environmental justice from the very artefacts through which donors codify their power over NGOs.

7.4 Avenues for further research

I hope that this study will be useful for donors and NGO professionals in the Global North and in the Global South that wish to reflect on their role within the field of environmental governance. Indeed, in a situation where aid is characterized by the imposition of agendas, pressures for accountability and limitations in accessibility, donors may want to take into consideration that their funding conditions can have negative effects on the very targets of their aid. My study offers an overview of these practices and possible consequences.

During the writing of this thesis, numerous questions arose that I could not include in a three-year project conducted autonomously, but that could constitute promising avenues for researching the impact of donors on local community participation as embedded in the environmental justice paradigm. For example, local community participation in environmental projects is not often studied within a comparative perspective. Works that replicate my study with a larger number of case studies, and/or that take into consideration other types of external and internal influences to NGOs' efforts towards community participation, such as their relationships with local authorities, or governments, as well as issues of horizontal accountability (to fellow NGOs), would help shed light on this understudied topic. Another avenue for research would be to explore the foundational basis on which funders identify their funding priorities, and to explore donors' accountability to back donors, as this work shows that many of the NGOs' problems ultimately originate in these relationships.

The main argument of this study is that in order to create the conditions for NGOs' to promote environmental justice, donors have to first recognize the power they hold over NGOs, and then dismantle the constraints they impose on NGOs by trusting them. Donors' behavior in particular situations of "crisis" such as the COVID pandemic of recent years, or the struggle for democracy during

the last years of the apartheid regime, suggest that these situations could spur donors to be more trusting, and thus to create the conditions for NGOs and local communities to work towards environmental justice. In this vein, further research is needed to assess the conditions that change donors' conceptions about trust.

Annex 1: Interviews

Interview 1: *Programme Manager - Cooperation and External Relations at EU Delegation to the Republic of South Africa, 19/1/21*

Interview 2: *Operations Lead at Green Trust, 20/1/21*

Interview 3: *Officer at Bread for the World, 1/2/21*

Interview 4: *Program Manager for Africa at Thousand Currents, 9/2/21*

Interview 5: *Senior Director of Monitoring, Evaluation and Outreach at CEPF, 26/2/21*

Interview 6: *Project Manager for Adaptation, Indigo 17/6/2021*

Interview 7 *Interim Director, AFRA, 28/6/21*

Interview 8: *Executive director, SPP 13/7/21*

Interview 9: *Development Director and Biodiversity Project manager, Indigo, 14/7/21*

Interview 10: *Project Manager, Green Cape, 17/8/21*

Interview 11: *Co-ordinator, SDCEA 9/8/21*

Interview 12: *Senior Policy Analyst, Climate and Energy, WWF – SA, 18/8/21*

Interview 13: *Project manager, SCAT., 26/8/21*

Interview 14: *Director, SCAT., 27/9/21*

Other Sources:

Project Launch 1: *Innovative Partnerships for Change: AFRA + INDIGO, 1/7/21*

Project Launch 2: *Climate Action to Accountability: WWF – SA + SACAN*, 31/8/21

Annex 2: Codebook

Following the theory as outlined in the previous sections, I focus on various aspects that can influence NGOs' ability to promote or limit local communities' participation. The contextual unit which is the focus of my research is the single concept or conveyed idea, which allows me to account for variation in sentences and paragraphs.

I have identified *categories* that roughly correspond to document sections, and specific *codes* that are organized under these categories.

Modalities for disbursing grants

First of all, I take into consideration the *modality chosen by donors for disbursing grants*.

I have identified three different modalities chosen by donors for disbursing grants:

- open calls (2 examples: CEPF and BfdW),
- selection by the donor (1 example: TC)
- competitive call for grants (2 examples: EU, Green Trust). There seems to be no correlation between the organizational nature of the donor and their preferred funding method.

As a first possible barrier between NGO and donor, the modality chosen can ultimately influence community recognition and participation in a competitive environment such as project funding, because some modalities can limit accessibility for small and “new” NGOs (reference). On the other hand, if the selection process is entirely carried out at the discretion of the donor without publishing a detailed call for grant applications, NGOs do not have the possibility of approaching donors through official channels, and the process can be exclusive for opposite reasons.

Guiding principles

This category is useful for identifying the reasons why different donors' calls for grants are built in a certain way and to understand what working principles donors adopt. The codes for this category were created inductively and references were found mainly in the introductory sections of the calls for grants and the donors' web pages. This code points to both recognition and participation; the extent to which local communities' knowledge and meaningful involvement is recognized in donors' guiding principles helps us understand to what extent NGOs will be able to promote recognition and participation in the course of project processes.

- **Conservation-environmental:** this is one of the most common tenets of the donors in my sample, as I am analyzing environmental projects. However, some of the donors in my sample do not have environmental goals as a primary focus. When compared to the *people* code in this same category, this code shows to what extent the focus of projects is on people or environmental goals and if and to what extent one is prioritized over the other.
- **Global goals:** the rationale of the grants often rests on global goals, such as the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, or CBD targets. Mentions of global goals can be significant to assess to what extent this aspect dictates the agenda of donors and consequently of local NGOs.
- **People and nature:** this code describes the extent of the focus on local communities and their characterization in donors' documentation, especially in their relationship to nature
- **Religion:** (present in the FBO case only) The presence of religious principles is useful to understand the extent to which affinity between donors and NGOs based on spirituality opens

or closes access to certain organizations or groups of people and what other effects it can have on recognition and participation.

- **Transform the sector:** (donor's sector). The goal of remodeling the philanthropic sector as a core principle of a donor organization derives from the recognition of unequal power dynamics between donors NGOs and communities. The presence of references to this is considered very positive.

Eligibility

Some donors provide numerous, well-detailed guideline documents for grant applications, while others provide very general or relatively vague criteria. This is relevant for my research, as this variability can affect NGOs' capacity or willingness to deal with certain requirements. The degree of detail and the number and extensiveness of the criteria NGOs are asked to fulfil to be awarded grants can have different and possibly opposite consequences. On the one hand, fewer criteria can make the application process smoother and less time and resource hungry, and thus facilitate NGOs' work. On the other hand, scant guidelines might come at the expense of clarity. The criteria might be ambiguous, and NGOs' compliance to them can be at the discretion of the donor. NGOs' perception with regard to donors' will be analyzed in a following chapter. The eligibility category regards the criteria NGOs and the initiatives they propose should fulfil in order to participate in the selection for the assignment of a grant. These criteria refer to the accessibility of a donor for NGOs and tell us about what types of NGOs can have access to these grants.

This category and the codes within it emerged inductively.

This category is subdivided into two subcategories:

1. NGOs: What the NGO should be and do
2. Project: What the project should be like and achieve

1. NGO

- **Have non-profit status:** this is relevant because some calls and some donors also accept applications from other types of organization, such as the private sector or research institutes, or even non-registered organizations

- **Capacity and experience:** sometimes very general requirements, sometimes more specific. This code is relevant because it can favor some organizations while limiting the eligibility others.
 - **To handle funds**
 - **Operational** definitions of *operational* vary among donors but can be ambiguous
 - **In the field of action**
 - **In project management**
 - **Individual** (of the project leader specifically)

- **Partnership with other NGOs:** in carrying out the project. This is relevant as a partnership between a more “professionalized” and a more “grassroots” organization can provide indirect access to funds for the latter (that might lack capacity requirements)

2. PROJECT

- **Innovation:** having innovative elements within a project proposal is a very common requisite for projects to be eligible for funding. The specific understanding of what innovation is can have different consequences on donors’ accessibility (Rauh 2010)

- **No harm:** requirements to avoid or minimize the negative consequences for people affected by projects. On the one hand, no-harm provisions force NGOs to think

through potential harm to local communities; on the other hand, definitions of harm are sometimes vague enough for this requirement to become irrelevant.

- **Scale up:** describes the possibility for projects to be scaled up at national-regional level as a criterion for receiving funds. This can have both the positive consequence of spreading good practices and the drawback of not recognizing the specificities of local contexts. In addition, this requirement could also limit the type of organizations that have access, as a prerequisite to scaling-up projects would be to have a regional or national reach, or to have a regional or national network in place.

Funding modalities (use of funds)

This category examines the characteristics of funds, once they are assigned, and the uses that NGOs can make of them. This category mainly describes limitations in the use of funds arranged by donors. Both the category and the codes that compose it emerged inductively and, as is also indicated by data on NGO perceptions, has to do with the trust, or the lack of it, that donors have in the organizations or movements they fund. It thus deals with the recognition of movements and NGOs as trustworthy organizations, in this case indicated by the freedom or limits on the uses of funds provided by donors.

- **Unconditional, core funding:** no or few rules about the specific use of funds or reporting requirements that derive from the use of funds. This shows that the donor trusts NGOs to use funds in the ways that they (and the communities) deem more appropriate in a specific time and situation.
- **Funds attached to fixed activities:** limitations (the degree of limitation) in the use of funds can stifle NGOs' and communities' agency as opposed to core funding, while strict reporting mechanisms can occupy NGOs' time and resources in this sense.

- **No total:** some donors require the presence of other funders or funds for a project in order to “pool the risk”. For the NGO this means more and different criteria to meet, more reporting requirements; it can be also indicate a “lack of trust” as mentioned above.

NGO-Donor relationships

Like the funding category, the NGO-donor relationship category emerged inductively from the texts. The codes here refer to the nature of the relationship between NGOs and donors, as understood by the donor. How donors and NGOs understand these relationships, and the awareness of features of the existence of power dynamics, has relevance for recognition and participation because it describes to what extent power rests in donors’ hands and to what extent donors recognize it, give voice and devolve decision-making power to NGOs.

- **Non-monetary support:** this code gathers mentions of donors’ relationships with NGOs that go beyond the provision of funding, such as capacity-building, networking possibilities, visibility and lobby activities in international policy-making fora.
- **Partnership:** this code collects references to a relationship of partnership, as far as possible (despite the power differentials) between donors and NGOs for working towards a common goal.
- **Recognition of power differentials:** recognizing power differentials linked to the relationship and a precondition of “partnership”. The donor recognizes the power differential between themselves and the NGOs and takes action to tackle or mitigate it.
- **Time:** this code deals with the sustainability of the project, and the willingness and possibility of building long-term partnerships between NGOs and donors, which is deemed positive for NGOs and communities (Delfin and Tang 2008).

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

This category gathers references to the requirements for reporting progress and outcomes of NGOs' work during project implementation, the use of funds, and the final evaluations of projects. Standard M&E practices, such as the widely used OECD DAC framework, have been defined as culturally inappropriate and inefficient (ref). The debate on this concerns what can be defined as success. M&E is described as a major issue in the literature about NGO-donor relationships (see for example Mueller-Hirth 2012). This category gathers codes that explore the modalities, the function and the main rationale for M&E and is useful to uncover whose perspectives are recognized in project accountability.

- **Donors' upward accountability:** Donors too are accountable and have to be credible in the eyes of their donors. This adds a layer of complexity to the picture that goes somewhat beyond the scope of this research. Many reporting and evaluation criteria are assessed at a higher level of accountability.
- **Modalities:** the modalities chosen by donors for NGOs to carry out the measurement of the impacts of a project help us gain insights about their ideas of "success"
- **Quantitative indicators:** quantitative indicators are considered partial indicators in light of the complexity of "change". They are certainly simpler to include and implement compared to qualitative indicators, that reasonably take more time to be categorized, processed and written. However, as shown by Woltering et al. (2019), quantitative indicators can hardly grasp the depth and nuances of the changes that have taken place within a community during the lifespan of a project; on the other hand, qualitative indicators are more onerous to monitor but more suitable to assess change; indicators should be developed by communities, which makes it costly and time-consuming.

- **Function:** the function of M&E as understood by a donor can reveal the importance it places on different aspects:
 - **Accountability**
 - **Learning**

Annex 3: Tables

Table 10. summarizes the findings of the Recognition of power differentials code

DONOR	REFERENCES	POINTS TO
EU	<i>"Because of our procedures are a bit heavy, and they are the administrative side and all of that, it's not so easy for the grassroots organizations to access our funding"</i> (Interview 1)	Recognition of hindering elements + mitigation inside funding model
CEPF	<i>We know this may feel like a lot, but don't panic. We're here to help! Your grants manager is always available to answer your questions.</i> (Managing your grants' financial requirements- webpage)	Recognition of hindering elements + mitigation inside funding model
Green Trust	<i>We place the onus on the applicant to qualify. We are not under pressure to disburse. They are under pressure to qualify.</i> (Interview 2)	Awareness of power differentials in place
BfdW	<i>All - rich and poor - should be grateful and humble to God as a giving power. Haughtiness on the part of the present so-called "donor organizations" is out of place, according to Christian understanding</i> ("Our Partners" web page)	Equality based on donors' values
	<i>Partners respect each other regardless of the power or size of the organization;</i> ("Our Partners" web page)	Recognition of power differentials
	<i>This also includes the conscious awareness that financial sovereignty can influence the power balance of a partnership;</i> ("Our Partners" web page)	Recognition of power differentials
	<i>Being a church-related organization or funding a church-related organization really gets access to the target group in a different way than the usual NGOs will have, because there is a relationship of trust</i> (Interview 3)	Partnership based on shared values
	<i>Close co-operation with local partners is a key feature of Bread for the World's project work. The term partnership describes a co-operative effort between persons and institutions in which common goals are pursued on the basis of shared core values and ideas as to how to achieve these goals.</i> ("Our Partners" web page)	Partnership based on shared values
	<i>By working together in partnership to achieve agreed goals transformative learning processes take place, that alters both parties</i> ("Our Partners" web page)	Adaptability, responsiveness

TC	<p>“One of the primary concerns of TC, is that in the relationship between funders and grantees there is an inevitable power dynamic, and we ask ourselves: are there ways of reducing its impact?” (Interview 4)</p>	Recognition of power differentials
	<p>[...] dismantle the unjust power differentials inherent in international development and philanthropy, while also holding ourselves as accountable, transparent, kind, and loving (Our Model)</p>	Action outside mainstream funding models
	<p>Based on these reports and continual feedback from partners, <i>Thousand Currents</i> has undertaken significant revisions to its partnership model over the years (“Learning and evaluation” web page)</p> <p>We share power, practices, and resources to reimagine new ways of living.(TC strategy)</p>	Adaptability, responsiveness

Table 11 summarizes the findings of the People and Nature code

DONOR	REFERENCES	POINTS TO
EU	<p><i>"We look how many factors have been taken into account: if they only look at one specific group or [...] they mentioned the needs of a wider group of people. If an application only mentioned that they spoke to farmers we will evaluate it in one way, if the similar application says that within that group of farmers they both identify that women have these specific needs [...] then we will evaluate that higher. (Interview 1)</i></p>	Attention to context
	<p><i>The call intends to tackle climate change while enhancing gender equality and participation of the youth and encourages innovative partnerships with the double objective of leaving no-one behind and leveraging the strengths of different stakeholders (Guidelines)</i></p>	Inclusiveness
CEPF	<p><i>Local knowledge is important in identifying, designing and planning the implementation of practical mitigation measures. It is especially important where the success depends on community support and action, both in implementing mitigation measures and in monitoring their success (Environmental and Social Management Framework)</i></p>	Local knowledge for mitigation of adverse impacts
	<p><i>The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) empowers people in developing and transitional countries to protect the world's biodiversity hotspots—some of the most biologically richest yet threatened ecosystems that are vital to humanity. (Operational Manual)</i></p>	People as means to protect nature
Green Trust	<p><i>Strong focus on environmental outcomes relevant to the wellbeing of people (Guidelines)</i></p>	Improvement of peoples' living conditions
	<p><i>Our passion is for people and nature to coexist in harmony for the benefit of our country and the wellbeing of all. (About Us Web page)</i></p>	Improvement of peoples' living conditions

	<p>We work with partners and communities who are the keepers of our natural resources and direct their energy and efforts to key levers of change for South Africa's future. (About Us Web page)</p>	<p>Improvement of peoples' living conditions + stewardship of nature</p>
BfdW	<p><i>Protect Creation</i> <i>Bring about a socio - ecological transformation (Strategy)</i></p>	<p>Human-Nature divide</p>
TC	<p><i>Thousand Currents partners with visionary grassroots groups, organizations, and movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America working on the interdependent issues of food sovereignty, alternative economies, and climate justice (TC Strategy)</i></p>	<p>Focus on people that work on environmental issues</p>
	<p><i>Movements vary greatly around the world, as the context and the people determine the structure and strategies within each movement. (TC Strategy)</i></p>	<p>Attention to context</p>
	<p><i>They reimagine wealth, power, and well-being to offer solutions that draw from ancestral wisdom (TC Strategy)</i></p>	<p>Value to local knowledge</p>

Table 12. summarizes the findings of the Capacity and Experience code

DONOR	REFERENCE	POINTS TO
EU	<p><i>Do the applicants and, if applicable, their affiliated entity(ies) have sufficient management in-house capacity (including staff, equipment and ability to handle the budget for the action)? (Guidelines for Grant applicants)</i></p>	Professionalization
	<p><i>Have [the applicants] the management capacity, professional competencies and qualifications required to successfully complete the proposed action?. (Guidelines for Grant applicants)</i></p>	
	<p><i>One thing that we're encouraging in the guidelines [...] is funding third parties [...] the idea there is that, you know, while there is still a lot of accountability, procedures can be a more flexible and amounts can be a bit smaller. So, the applicant NGOs can distribute, and can use that as an instrument to build the capacity of a smaller CSOs or grassroots organizations.</i></p>	<p>Recognition of hindering element + mitigation</p> <p>Pass the burden of capacity-building to NGOs</p>
CEPF	<p><i>CEPF will focus on analyzing the materials provided by the potential grantee to determine the following aspects related to the environmental and social effects of the project:</i> [...] • Capacity of the applicant to implement any required safeguard-related measures during the preparation and implementation of the project. (Operational Manual)</p>	Professionalization related to social/environmental safeguards
	<p><i>If the grantee does not possess the necessary technical capacities, or if their relationship with Indigenous Peoples is weak, the involvement of experienced local community organizations and NGOs may be appropriate; they should be acceptable to all parties involved. (Operational Manual)</i></p>	Value to local knowledge
	<p><i>"We have to have these safeguards, they are a burden, and it is a challenge to deal with them, but we try to make them more understandable to our grantees, because they are difficult to understand, they are burdensome, but they have benefits"</i> (Interview 5)</p>	Recognition of hindering element
	<p><i>In assessing applications, the following 2 capabilities will be considered:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. Programmatic Capacity/Experience: Successful applicants will be nongovernmental organizations</i> 	Professionalization

	<p>presenting substantial experience in biodiversity conservation in the region.</p> <p>2. Administrative Capacity/Experience: A sound and tested financial and administrative system will be a key area for assessment in each application. Applicants should describe in detail their existing administrative and financial structures [...](Operational Manual)</p>	
Green Trust	<p>Please attached the following information as an Addendum 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational profile (Legal entity type, founding date, vision, mission, objectives, outcomes) Abridged CV and competencies of the project leader. 	Capacity of single individuals
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key competencies of the organization to deliver on outcomes promised in this proposal. <p>(Funding application form)</p>	Professionalization
BfdW	<p>In order to apply for a project, an organization must demonstrate expertise in the relevant field [...] the organizational capacity of the partner organizations to conduct a project as well as the reasonability of a planned project. (Financial Support)</p>	Professionalization
	<p>Proof of competence in the areas of planning, monitoring, and evaluation (PME): this competence may be demonstrated, for example by means of successfully implemented projects and the project application. Internal PME guidelines, which show how PME processes are integrated, can also be submitted. (Financial Support)</p>	Professionalization Exclusion of "new" organizations
	<p>To begin a cooperation, Bread for the World needs to examine the organizational capacity of the partner organizations to conduct a project as well as the reasonability of a planned project. (Financial Support)</p>	Professionalization
	<p>"[...] we cannot handle so many small projects and thus we resort to small project funds. This means that an experienced partner organization receives a larger budget which they can allocate to these small projects of small organizations. They are in charge of accountability and responsible for the administration of the overall fund" (Interview 3)</p>	Recognition of hindering element + mitigation Pass the burden of capacity-building to NGOs
	<p>"There are challenges as well, the church structures are not always easy-going, the administrative side is not always as good as those of NGOs, and so they are administratively sometimes more difficult than an NGO. This means that they need sometimes more support as well". (Interview 3)</p>	Partnership based on shared values (although allegedly less effective) Preference for church-based organizations even though less "effective" in certain areas)
		No conditions on experience/capacity (but no eligibility criteria in general)

TC		
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Table 13. summarizes the findings of the Innovation code

DONOR	REFERENCES	POINTS TO
EU	<i>One thing that was very highly valued in this specific goal is innovative partnerships [...] the innovation here was on innovative processes, [...] to give a voice to their communities</i> (Interview 1)	Innovation as process of LC involvement
	<i>The call [...] encourages innovative partnerships with the double objective of leaving no-one behind and leveraging the strengths of different stakeholders</i> (Guidelines for Grant applicants)	
CEPF	<i>Such participation builds on local knowledge and technical expertise and leverage social capital to bring innovative ideas to solving local problems.</i> (Environmental and Social Management Framework)	Innovation as value to local knowledge
Green Trust	<i>Is the solution innovative when considered relative to other initiatives taking place? Are there similar initiatives to the one proposed? Why is this proposal different?</i> (Application guidelines)	Innovation as “uniqueness”
	<i>They (applicants) would have to keep coming back to us with a new, innovative and transferable solution. If they come back with the “same old” – the chances are good they will not be funded.</i> (Interview 2)	Innovation as “brand new”
BfdW	<i>Long-term partnerships exist with a small number of partner organizations due to their extensive capacities and ever new projects</i> (“Our partners” webpage)	Innovation as “selling something new” to secure funds
	<i>[...] we discuss whether we will continue with the next phase, with the same target group but with deeper-going activities, or with the same activities and a different target group, or in another region. So, we actually do not fund the same-same all over again; there have to be different target groups or activities or a deepening of activities</i> (Interview 3)	Innovation as follow-up
TC	<i>They [TC partners] reimagine wealth, power, and well-being to offer solutions that draw from ancestral wisdom. Through their innovations, they reflect the needs of today and the possibilities of tomorrow.</i> (TC strategy paper)	Innovation as value to local knowledge

Annex 4: A note on research practices and data collection

As mentioned in the introduction, the research for this thesis was broadly reorganized as a consequence of the COVID emergency. The initial plan was to carry out an ethnographic study of the relationships of a sample of South African environmental NGOs and the local communities they work with, with participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups as main data collection tools.

This extensive fieldwork was to be undertaken in the Western Cape region of South Africa, but my stay unfortunately lasted less than two months. I spent those two months selecting case studies, learning about environmental CSOs in South Africa, and carrying out exploratory interviews with NGOs in the Western Cape. I reached the conclusion that in order to gather meaningful data, a short internship with one of these organizations would have been of great value, as it would have given me give me access to documentation, partner NGOs, local communities and donors, besides experiencing the daily life of an environmental NGO. I was in contact with the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) with the hope of carrying out an internship in their offices in South Durban.

As it was initially planned, my research relied on extensive fieldwork and data collection in South Africa, in close contact with the organizations that built the projects that form the focus of my case studies.

Given the protraction of the pandemic and the time constraints of my PhD program, rethinking and redesigning my study to make it feasible remotely, while retaining the main focus on local communities' participation became crucial. A viable option for the study was to turn to examine the relationships between NGOs and their funders, an aspect that had been less central in the first design, into the central one. Donors exert great power in shaping NGOs attitudes towards local communities according to the literature (see chapter 1), if only for the fact that NGOs are largely dependent on donors' money, that is subject to specific rules.

It was possible to carry out this work during a lockdown that had no clear end in sight. Firstly, many donors have a considerable amount of documentation that was readily and publicly available online; this provided a set of data to explore while refining the theoretical framework, methods, and case studies to fit an entirely new design. Secondly, I assumed that it would have been easier to interview donors professionals online, rather than NGOs that were on the frontlines of a pandemic in a developing country and that surely had urgent problems to tackle. I hoped that as the pandemic came under control, there would be a chance to talk to NGOs as the situation would have improved. Unfortunately, more than 1 year and a half later, the COVID situation in South Africa is very far from over (the country is, at the time of writing, recovering from the third wave).

The methods and the rationale for this dissertation, which were not my first choice but have to a great extent been dictated by the pandemic, are explained here. Despite the reason for adopting this approach was dictated by necessity, these methods are still an appropriate way for exploring local community participation and recognition in environmental projects. An in-depth analysis of donors' and NGO' documentation, triangulated with key-informant interviews, helps understand what drives donors' explicit or implicit approaches to environmental justice. Although local communities' voice is missing in this work, I deem this approach relevant and innovative for exploring environmental justice in local environmental projects, as it is performed through the information donor organizations share publicly on their channels, and that allegedly mirrors their best standards and aspirations.

This exploratory research demands an in-depth qualitative study, paying attention not only to the specific context of the study, but also to the political and social meanings that make it intelligible. To allow this, the scope of the research to a single country and to limited group of donor and civil society organizations to be investigated in depth. At first, my main research methods were semi-structured interviews with NGOs practitioners and local community members, together with content analysis of primary and secondary sources and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews (where guidelines and specific areas of discussion are outlined), identify broad areas for discussion but remain flexible, and give respondents space to share whatever they feel is important and following up points as they arise. My interview schedule included a mixture of closed and open-ended items about

NGOs' culture and practices to encourage community participation. The content analysis of NGO documentation was to follow an inductive approach, where codes reflect the themes that emerge in the course of the analysis.

After the failure of my fieldwork, the methodological approach remained broadly the same, but as anticipated, the focus of the research shifted to NGO-donor relations. The content analysis of donors' and NGOs' documentation has thus come to represent the bulk of the research, and results were triangulated with semi-structured, online interviews with NGOs and donor practitioners.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. First, I describe EJ as a theoretical framework for studying donor-funded projects, and the operationalization of the factors that are found to shape NGOs-local community relationships followed by the research questions. Then, I provide the context for my research, with an overview of environmental governance, donors and NGO in South Africa. Next, I provide a classification of donors and an overview of my case studies. Following that, I describe the chosen methods for data collection and analysis.

Annex 5: List of abbreviations

BBBEE: Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment

BfdW: Brot für die Welt

CEPF: Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund

CBD: Convention on Biological Diversity

CBO: Community-Based Organization

CSA: Climate-Smart-Agriculture

CSO: Civil Society Organization

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

DAC: Development Assistance Committee

EJ: Environmental Justice

EU: European Union

FNF: Friedrich Naumann Foundation

GCF: Green Climate Fund

GRO: Grassroot Organization

IEJ: Institute for Economic Justice

INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization

IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

IPLCs: Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

KZN: KwaZulu-Natal

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

M&E: Monitoring and Evaluation

ODA: Official Development Assistance

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

PME: Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation

PMERL: Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

RIT: Regional Implementation Team

SACAN: South Africa Climate Action Network

SMO: Social Movement Organization

TC: Thousand Currents

WWF: World Wide Fund for Nature

WWF-SA: World Wide Fund for Nature South Africa

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