

Emergence and roles of non-profit organizations faced with the failure of the post-colonial state in French-speaking Africa

An analysis on the basis of the non-profit literature

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1. Introduction

For several years, the literature devoted to the non-profit sector has dealt with the question of the *raison d'être* of non-profit organizations (NPO), beside the state and market (Nyssens, 2000). The non-profit sector, such as it is defined in North-American and British literature, encompasses a set of organizations, named non-profit organizations or third sector organizations, which share five characteristics. These NPOs are defined as being formal; private; independent; not distributing profit to "owners" or stakeholders (non-distribution constraint); and involving some degree of voluntary contribution of time and/or money and in the form of free participation to the organization (Salamon and Anheier, 1997)¹.

The primary objective of this paper is to question the universality of North-American and British non-profit theories. More precisely, we will focus on economic theories of excess demand accounting for the production of collective goods and services by NPOs in a context of state failure. We will then, in a second stage, try to put these theories to the test in the African context.

We have structured our analysis in four distinct parts. We will first present the North-American and British theoretical framework for the analysis of the role of NPOs in the production of collective goods and services, in complement to public action. We will then put forward a series of hypotheses based on this non-profit literature. In the third section, several warnings will be issued as to the possibility of transposing this theoretical corpus into African realities; we will then describe the evolution and the role played by the post-colonial state in Africa in the last decades. On the basis of these reflections, we will analyze the relevance of the concept of non-governmental organization (NGO) to describe and illustrate the initiatives observed within the third sector in Africa. In the fourth and last part, which will constitute the heart of our analysis, we will compare hypotheses based on a theoretical model developed in

¹ This definition, by Salamon and Anheier (1997), is commonly accepted and is still gaining ground, but other authors also put forward their definition of a NPO; see in particular Hansmann (1980).

the North, on the one hand, with field observations and illustrations from French-speaking Africa.

2. Literature review

The literature that we will analyze in the framework of the present article refers to demand-side economic theories of the non-profit sector. More precisely, we will focus on those theories that consider third sector organizations as answers aiming to overcome state failures with regard to the production of collective goods and services.

2.1. Preamble

According to economic theory, a collective good is a good whose consumption is indivisible and can be characterized by non-rivalness and non-excludability (Varian, 1992). Non-rivalness means that consumption of the good by one individual does not reduce the amount of the good available for consumption by others, while non-excludability means that it is difficult - or even impossible - to exclude someone from using that good through a price mechanism. Environmental protection provides a good example hereof².

According to the theories of excess demand, the production of collective goods and services by NPOs is complementary to public action, in a context of state failure. This theoretical corpus makes reference, on the one hand, to the "public choice theory", which explains the fact that minority demands remain unmet by the median voter theorem³ (section 2.2) and, on the other hand, to the possibility, for the "failing" state, to delegate part of the production of collective goods to associations (section 2.3). It is thus possible to identify a series of comparative advantages of NPOs over public authorities regarding the production of collective goods (section 2.4).

2.2. Satisfaction of the preferences of non-median voters

According to the "public goods theory of nonprofit organizations" (a theory whose Weisbrod [1975] is an emblematic author⁴), the fact that this demand is left unmet by the government can be accounted for by the hypothesis of the satisfaction of the preferences of the median voter. There are thus individuals who are willing to pay more, on a voluntary basis, to obtain a larger quantity (or a higher quality) of collective goods in order to maximize their utility.

NPOs will satisfy a portion of this excess demand, left unmet by public authorities (unable to meet these differentiated and heterogeneous demands), by providing the collective goods and services desired and financed by this group of minority voters. The non-profit theory underlines the fact that whenever a state (be it democratic or not) makes decisions, there will be dissatisfied individuals, who do not share the preferences of the median voter and who will justify the creation of alternative solutions, *inter alia* through NPOs⁵.

² Some goods – named quasi-collective goods – only partly meet the two criteria defining purely collective goods but, despite their private character, they do not belong to the category of individual goods, because of the positive collective externalities which they generate through their production and/or consumption. Quasi-collective goods include for example healthcare, education, social assistance or proximity services.

³ The median voter "*represents that largest segment of the demand for public and quasi-public goods within the electorate. Another way to define the median voter is to think of the statistically average person and the demands she would make on governmental spending policies*" (Anheier, 2005, p. 121).

⁴ Other authors, such as Ben-Ner and Gui (2000), Kingma (1997) or Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen (1991), also analyzed the emergence of NPOs in a context of unmet demands in the production of collective goods and services.

⁵ The existence of an excess or differentiated demand for collective goods linked to the heterogeneity of the demand (James) or to the costs of transaction inherent in state action (Krashinsky) will not be addressed in this article.

2.3. Delegation of the production of collective goods to NPOs

Still assuming that the state is "failing", another segment of the excess demand theory analyzes the delegation of the production of collective goods to NPOs by public authorities, which would then ensure (at least partly) the financing of these goods (James, 1990). The existence of public subsidies for associations could, from this viewpoint, constitute an incentive to adopt a particular form of organizations - namely, in the case under consideration, that of an NPO (Mertens, 2002).

In addition, one resorts to the argument of confidence, developed by Hansmann (1980), to justify this "delegation" of the production of collective goods to associations. Despite information asymmetry problems⁶, the non-distribution constraint that characterizes NPOs acts as a signal generating confidence on the part of public authorities and offers, to a certain extent, more guarantee than do for-profit organizations (FPOs) against the risks of opportunistic behaviours; indeed, FPO managers could for example decide to produce lower quality goods in order to maximize their profit.

However, this non-distribution constraint does not constitute a sufficient argument to justify the delegation of the production of certain collective goods to NPOs. Thus, it is necessary to turn to NPOs' comparative advantages over public institutions in matters of production of collective goods.

2.4. Comparative advantages of NPOs over public institutions

NPOs have comparative advantages over public institutions at various levels: first, in terms of contents of the demand expressed by the population; secondly, in terms of production and transaction costs, which are lower in NPOs; and finally, in terms of capacity to mobilize voluntary resources (Mertens, 2002).

2.4.1. Contents of the demand expressed by the population

At the level of the contents of the differentiated demands left unmet by public authorities, we can distinguish three characteristics of NPOs that enable them to overcome state failures and thus meet the population's expectations in terms of collective goods - namely their proximity, their responsiveness and their size (Mertens, 2002)⁷.

NPOs' greater proximity to the targeted populations expresses in particular through the control exerted on the organization by demand-side stakeholders, which, in NPOs, include beneficiary categories (Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen, 1991). NPOs are consequently more attentive to the expectations of the various population groups and they thus seem to have a greater capacity to identify the demand and to meet it, at a lower cost than the state might do. In addition, this type of control by stakeholders, combined to the relatively small size of non-profit organizations, allows not only to overcome some state failures but also to avoid, through competition among NPOs, the risks of wastage and misuse which are likely to occur in public institutions when the control exerted over officials is insufficient. Indeed, officials who are given a margin of autonomy are likely to adopt opportunistic behaviours that can lead them to confuse the general interest with the maximization of their personal interests (Greffe, 1981, quoted by Mertens, 2002).

⁶ We consider here problems arising when the funder is distinct from the consumer and is thus unable to observe the consumer's behaviour.

⁷ The state is unable to meet these differentiated demands (from different groups); indeed, even decentralization, though it provides solutions which are better adapted to the populations' needs, does not allow to overcome problems linked to heterogeneity when this heterogeneity is not geographical.

Another argument justifying the delegation of the production of collective goods to NPOs relates to these organizations' responsiveness when faced with new demands from the population. Besides, NPOs' working methods seem more flexible than the bureaucratic system that is specific to public entities.

2.4.2. Lower production and transaction costs and greater capacity to mobilize voluntary resources

A specificity of non-profit organizations is their capacity to mobilize voluntary workers, eager to contribute to the pursuit of the organization's social mission. These voluntary resources can constitute an advantage over public authorities, which mobilize very few (if any) voluntary resources. Indeed, NPO's capacity to mobilize voluntary resources constitutes a positive externality supporting "*citizens' participation (in terms of time, money and competences) in the field of "collective action" and thus contributes to reinforcing social links and to democratizing the process of allocation of resources*" (Mertens, 2002, p. 64).

In addition, NPOs have a capacity for social innovation in the field of the production of collective goods; in some areas, they precede public action. NPOs then meet, on a small scale, demands for collective goods and services that had hitherto remained unmet because the recipients were not able to pay for these goods or services or the demands had not yet been identified by the state; NPOs meet these demands thanks to the voluntary resources that they are able to mobilize (Nyssens, 2000). The fact that volunteers make their workforce available "free of charge" to the organization indeed allows to reduce production costs (James, 1990).

However, according to the theory of "voluntary failure" (Salamon, 1987), NPO's action has limits and can, in some cases, prove inefficient. For example, an NPO can be faced with the problem of individuals involved in the organization as volunteers taking over control of the organization's mission. In other words, these individuals would be likely to deal with the social problems as they perceive them and not according to the desires expressed by the recipients of these collective services (problem of philanthropic particularism).

3. Can the theoretical corpus analyzing NPOs qua producers of collective goods be transposed in the African context?

Generally speaking, the link between the non-profit theoretical framework analyzing the *raison d'être* of NPOs (in particular in a context of state failure) and third sector organizations in Africa appears to be weak. Anheier's (1990) work constitutes an exception hereto: he analyses the comparative advantages, in the African context, of third sector organizations (which he names "private voluntary organizations", or PVOs) over the – strongly questioned – African states⁸. As for Sanyal (1999), he considers non-governmental organizations as potential agents of "another development" in the South, thanks to their supposed advantages over the state. Finally, we should also mention Develtere and Fonteneau (2003) and Defourny and Develtere (1999), who, through their respective researches, questioned the relevance of the concepts elaborated in the North for the analysis of third sector organizations in the South. We will develop these authors' various arguments in more details as our analysis progresses.

First, several warnings seem necessary as to a possible transposition of theoretical frameworks developed in the North into a Southern context. It has to be reminded that, as we have just underlined, the concept of NPO was developed within a particular institutional framework (namely the North-American and British context) and was never really put to test

⁸ The author identifies four main arguments (economic, social, political and cultural ones) as comparative advantages of PVOs over public authorities.

in Southern contexts (except for the few studies that have just been mentioned). The transposition of this concept into the South thus requires some caution, and some adjustments have to be made in order to adequately describe the realities observed in Africa (Baron, 2007; Fraisse, 2008). Secondly, a reflection about the role played by the state in the African context seems relevant to highlight the divergence between the conception of the state that prevails in the North and the actual mission that African states currently fulfil (Bayart, 1989; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). In order to better apprehend the evolution of the role of African states over time, this reflection will be carried out in a historical perspective, covering the period from the 1960s, when many African states gained independence, until now.

3.1. Putting the concept of non-profit organization to the test in a Southern context

As we have just pointed out, economic theories on the non-profit sector were born in a specific institutional framework - namely that of the liberal democracy, which was (and is still) prevailing in the North-American and British context - and they seem to be in accordance with this reality. But it seems reasonable to think that other logics would underlie African realities and therefore question the supposed universality of all economic non-profit theories (Nyssens, 2000). As underlined by Develtere and Fonteneau (2003), the concept of NPO cannot be transposed as such into the African context, even though it might be very tempting to resort to arguments developed in North with a view to conceptualizing seemingly similar Southern realities. Several remarks can be made against the definition of a NPO as to its potential applicability in a Southern context. It seems indeed of little relevance in the context of Southern countries to impose a non-distribution constraint upon emerging initiatives within the third sector, in particular in subsistence economies, where various forms of profit distribution (when the organization is able to generate profit) are considered with a view to improving the living conditions of the individuals involved in the organization (Defourny and al., 1999). This criterion seems indeed too restrictive; an analysis of the third sector restricted to those organizations complying with the non-distribution constraint (as recommended by the non-profit literature) leads to underestimate the importance of this sector in Southern countries (Nyssens, 2000).

It can be observed that the conditions of emergence of third sector organizations in the South are very different from the *raisons d'être* of these organizations in the North (Nyssens, 2004). But all economic theories of non-profit organizations were designed and elaborated exclusively on the basis of Northern realities. Consequently, it is now necessary, in order to understand the role of NPOs in French-speaking Africa, to begin anew, basing the analysis on the conditions that favoured these organizations' emergence. In the African context, third sector organizations emerged as an alternative solution to a "failing" and corrupted state, strongly questioned, in particular as regards its responsibility in a context of growing poverty (Anheier, 1990). Besides, these *raisons d'être* confirm the relevance of an analysis of the role of NPOs in terms of state failure rather than in terms of market failure (market failure being another possible explanation for the emergence of NPOs). In order to support our point about the "failure" of African states, we analyze, in the next section, the evolution of the role of the state in Africa over the last decades.

3.2. Reflections on the role of post-colonial states in the African context

States do not seem to play the same role in Africa and in Western societies (Bayart, 1989; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). A short historical overview of the role of post-colonial states in African societies highlights the reasons for these differences. This evolution has been marked by three main tendencies, from the 1960s until now (Petiteville, 1998, quoted by Leloup, 2003). Petiteville first identifies the "developer" states, at the time of independences; these were followed by the "de-legitimated" states of the 1970s (a period characterized by a

generalized crisis and the advent of structural adjustment plans) and finally, in a third period, by the "modest and liberal" state of the 1980s and 1990s (this latter model is still prevailing).

In the 1950s and 1960s prevailed in Africa states known as "developer states", i.e. planning and authoritative states, which were actors in their country's economic development. These states aimed to build nations from sometimes unconnected peoples. Their historical mission consisted in improving the living conditions of the greatest number, inter alia through the modernization of society, economic growth, or the improvement of social welfare. This set of goals and priorities directly echoed the modes of operation of Western-type modern democratic states (Hugon, 2001).

But in the 1970s and 1980s, African states were faced with an economic crisis, due to globalization but also to the failure of these "developer" states regarding the mission with which they were entrusted. Indeed, African states did not manage to fulfil their historical mission because their practices differed from that of Western-style modern democratic state. According to Alain Marie, African states seemed to be based on a model marked by neopatrimonialism and clientelism. "Neopatrimonialism" referred to a situation in which the state was used by the members of the "power elite" as a tool or a place to increase their personal wealth. In fact, these elite members attempted to appropriate part of the national resources and to turn them into their private properties, while redistributing part of these resources to their close family and their community of origin through clientelism (awarding of grants, appointment of family, friends and associates to positions of authority, etc.). This redistribution then ensured the legitimacy of African post-colonial states through the enrichment of individuals not belonging to the state bourgeoisie but maintaining interpersonal relations with it - in other words, through a mechanism of community solidarity (Marie, 1997).

Faced with the generalized crisis in Africa in the 1970s, the state and the political system became negatively connoted and lost their legitimacy. According to Haubert, these states were then regarded as responsible for poverty in Africa and were denounced by international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Funds for the corruptive practices and other opportunistic behaviours of the ruling elite and for their inefficiency in ensuring a good governance (Haubert, 2000).

In order to unseat these technocratic states, then strongly impugned and unable to meet the population's social needs, international agencies initiated in the 1980s the so-called structural adjustment plans. These plans aimed, inter alia, to reduce public expenditure in matters of social welfare and health. The progressive withdrawal of the state (which was reduced as much as it could possibly be done) "recommended" by international agencies (which aimed to restore macro-economic balances and to reduce public deficit) led the various actors to turn to third sector organizations (Hibou, 1996, quoted by Leloup and al, 2003; Baron, 2007). In the 1990s, these organizations were thus entrusted with the mission to promote the general development of African societies, without any state interventionism and according to practices that differed markedly from the bureaucratic management which is characteristic of public institutions (Sanyal, 1999; Pirotte, 2005; Poncelet et al., 2006).

3.3. Relevance of the concept of non-governmental organization to analyze African realities

On the basis of these reflections, we deemed it relevant to analyze a particular form of third sector organizations, namely non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to translate and illustrate the realities observed within the third sector such as they are experienced in the context of French-speaking Africa. Indeed, as underlined by Defourny and Develtere (1999), there is in Africa an ever-increasing number of organizations that – even though they do not

adopt a non-distribution constraint – do not have the pursuit of profit as their primary goal but rather aim to benefit the community ("not for profit but for service"). Many of these initiatives adopt forms close to associations, such as that of NGO.

According to Sanyal (1999), NGOs in Southern countries *"are primarily local organisations that develop social and economic activities and are independent of government"* (page 165). This definition consequently makes it possible to lift the non-distribution constraint, which does not make sense in Africa, as we have just explained in the previous section. Sanyal adds that NGOs primarily aim to support local communities and to involve them in collective projects of self-promotion, on the basis of democratic and decentralized mechanisms and of collaboration among individuals.

In addition, NGOs seem to play an ever greater role in African societies, complementing public action (Poncelet et al, 2006). According to Pirotte, for a few decades, there has been in Africa an upsurge of associative practices of the NGO type. In the Republic of Benin, for example, which has a population of about seven million, two successive studies (carried out in 1998 and 2000) would have listed respectively 1,500 and 2,700 NGOs (Pirotte, 2005). The Democratic Republic of the Congo would count, according to a research carried out by the National Council of Development NGOs and the Zairian section of the UNICEF in 1996, 1,322 NGOs in activity (Poncelet et al., 2006). In French-speaking Africa, NGOs thus contribute, through their actions, to help the most destitute populations. This role becomes all the more crucial nowadays as the financial crisis persists and the state is unable to meet the social needs of the populations.

4. The production of collective goods and services by third sector organizations faced with state failure in the French-speaking African context

In this section, we will develop the various hypotheses (already mentioned above) about the role of NPOs compared to that of public institutions, with a view to assessing their degree of "generality" by putting them to the test in the African context. To illustrate our point, we will use a few concrete examples of non-governmental organizations, mostly from French-speaking Africa.

But first, let us briefly recall the hypotheses (resulting from the North-American and British non-profit literature) which we chose to put to the test in the African context:

1. NPOs, faced with excess demands left unmet by a "failing" state, step in to meet these demands, which can be defined as "residual" in relation to the median voter's preferences in matters of production of collective goods (Weisbrod, 1975).
2. An alternative approach consists in considering that the "failing" state deliberately decides to delegate the production of some collective goods to non-profit organizations while ensuring (at least partially) the financing of these goods (James, 1990).
3. NPOs have comparative advantages over public institutions that justify this phenomenon of "delegation" of the production of collective goods. These advantages can concern the contents of the demand expressed by the population as well as NPOs' capacity to mobilize voluntary resources and to produce at lower cost.
 - 3.1. Thanks to their size, proximity and responsiveness, NPOs seem to be able to overcome some state failures and thus meet the local populations' demands for collective goods or services left unmet by public authorities (Mertens, 2002).
 - 3.2. NPOs have a capacity for social innovation; indeed, they have a greater capacity than the state to mobilize voluntary resources and to produce collective goods at lower

cost, and this allows them, in some cases, to precede the action of public authorities in the production of some collective goods and services (Nyssens, 2000).

4.1. NPOs, faced with excess demands left unmet by a "failing" state, step in to meet these demands, which can be defined as "residual" in relation to the median voter's preferences in matters of production of collective goods (Weisbrod, 1975).

It seems difficult to put this hypothesis to the test in the African context. Indeed, the existence of a demand for collective goods and services left unmet by public authorities' limited production is obvious in African societies. It is not only a "residual" demand unsatisfied by the "failing" states which have become unable to solve many social problems and to meet their populations' expectations in terms of production of collective goods and services (Defourny and Develtere, 1999). Thus, it underlies the complementary (or compensatory) role played by non-profit organizations, faced with these "failing" states (Poncelet et al., 2006).

In matters of community projects' implementation, the legitimacy of NGOs in the eyes of the local populations seems to depend not only on their capacity to overcome state failures but also on their autonomy from dominant political institutions, which are nowadays strongly questioned in African societies (Jaglin, 2001). NGOs' independence from state control even appears to constitute an important condition for success for the projects they set up, as though this constituted a guarantee – generating confidence - that these initiatives will not be "hijacked" by the ruling elite, which is stigmatized for its neopatrimonialism and clientelism (Sanyal, 1999).

But in practice, NGOs' autonomy from state entities can be questioned. Indeed, NGOs seem to be dependent on recognition by the state (Fall, 2003); they can even appear to seek to get closer to public entities, with the hope of obtaining subsidies (Pirotte, 2005). It can even be noticed that some NGOs are actually initiated by the government itself, for political or financial reasons (Anheier, 1990). In this context, public entities thus exert indirect control on the activities undertaken by these NGOs, consequently reducing their autonomy from the state.

4.2. An alternative approach consists in considering that the "failing" state deliberately decides to delegate the production of some collective goods to non-profit organizations while ensuring (at least partially) the financing of these goods (James, 1990).

The subsidizing of NGOs by public entities characterize, to some extent, the phenomenon of delegation described by James (1990) in non-profit theory. However, the extent of this phenomenon can be supposed to be relatively limited in the African context, given the current lack of financial resources of African states (Poncelet et al., 2006). It is important here to underline the paramount influence of a category of external stakeholders, namely financial backers. These seem to have appropriated the role of the state as regards the delegation of the production of collective goods or services to third sector organizations. In this sense, Anheier (1990) specifies that, in the African context, where the public sector is heavily criticized, the third sector seems to be gaining ground in the area of development and seems to emerge as an intermediary between the state and the market, and between the international level (external financial backers) and private recipients at the local level (households), in particular as regards the transfer of funding for development.

NGOs seem thus to play a role of "development brokers" (as developed by Bierschenk et al., 2000) with respect to international development agencies, more commonly called financial backers. Financial backers indeed seem to become involved in the financing of collective services via local NGOs to which they delegate the mission of carrying out their projects for

destitute populations (Poncelet et al., 2006). These external actors somehow meet the unmet excess demand that we have identified above; this excess demand is not necessarily directed at the "failing and corrupted" state anymore, but it is echoed by NGOs, which act as intermediaries between financial backers and the populations (Leloup, 2003).

With the support of financial backers, NGOs managed to mobilize significant financial resources for various development projects supposed to reflect the needs expressed by the recipients (Angé, 2005; Pirotte, 2005). By so doing, NGOs provided, in some areas, collective services which are traditionally within the competence of the state, such as education, health, socio-collective infrastructures etc. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the sector of education, which had long been dominated by the churches, is today one of NGOs' favourite areas; this evolution is linked to the decrease in public schools' resources (Poncelet et al., 2006).

Generally speaking, one notes a strong dependency of NGOs on financial and technical resources from financial backers (Fall, 2003; Anheier, 1990; Sanyal, 1999). Relations with external organizations thus seem to allow NGOs to gain access to certain resources that have become essential to their development (Develtere and Fonteneau, 2003). Some initiatives even seem to be created with the aim of receiving part of the funds made available by this "international windfall" rather than in response to unmet demands expressed by the local populations (Angé, 2005). Indeed, the financing opportunities offered by financial backers to NGOs as well as the prospects for employment and remunerative activities resulting hereof tend to encourage some individuals to create an NGO. In Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo), for example, many NGOs are in operation, even though they have not yet been granted an operation license. Other organizations, referred to as "briefcase" NGOs, do have an operation license but the briefcases of their founders are their only offices. In this context, it seems legitimate to ask whether these external funds really finance the production of goods and services meeting unmet demands expressed by the local population, or whether they rather constitutes an answer to needs identified by the external actors themselves – needs whose targeted populations then become aware (Develtere and Fonteneau, 2003). In addition, Sanyal (1999) underlines the fact that many NGOs which are dependent on external funding are bound by very strict requirements imposed by their financial backers; these requirements can hamper their decision-making power and their capacity for action. These requirements can for example consist in constraints in terms of deadlines, goals to be achieved, or management of the funds granted to NGOs (Jaglin, 2001). This working method can go against local actors' own temporality and their reactivity in terms of adaptation to long-term constraints (Debuyst, 2001). A certain flexibility in project management thus appears necessary to avoid loosing the comparative assets of NGOs linked to their autonomy, which guarantees, to some extent, their legitimacy in the eyes of the local communities (Sanyal, 1999).

4.3. NPOs have comparative advantages over public institutions.

In this context, and keeping in mind the framework of the relations linking the various stakeholders (namely NGOs and the state, as well as new actors such as external financial backers), we can now analyze the presumed assets (such as they are listed in the non-profit literature) of NGOs over public institutions in the production of collective goods and services in Africa. We will first analyze the efficiency of African NGOs in comparison to public institutions; this analysis will be based on some of their characteristics (at the level of the contents of demand). Secondly, we will discuss third sector organizations' capacity for social innovation (linked in particular to voluntary resources).

4.3.1. Thanks to their size, proximity and responsiveness, NPOs seem to be able to overcome some state failures and thus meet the local populations' demands for collective goods or services left unmet by public authorities (Mertens, 2002).

Public institutions indeed seem to be characterized, to some extent, by hierarchical inflexibility, linked to the bureaucratic model upon which they are based. This working method tends to slow down the implementation of their projects for the community. NGOs, on the contrary, are closer to the local populations. Thanks to NGOs' small size, the populations have greater opportunities to get involved in the organization and, consequently, to take part in the implementation of grassroots projects (Fall, 2003). These characteristics make it easier for NGOs to identify and respond to the particular needs of local populations in terms of collective goods and services and increases NGOs' responsiveness when it comes to meeting unsatisfied demands (Sanyal, 1999).

This capacity of NGOs to adapt to the needs of destitute populations and to provide a quick answer to these needs justifies, *inter alia*, the financial support that they receive from international institutions, which consequently entrust them with increasingly wide-ranging (and even, in some cases, little profitable) social missions (Leloup, 2003). Financial backers such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union and the World Bank have taken part, since 1986, in the funding of micro-projects for local populations, with NGOs acting, thanks to their proximity to the local populations, as efficient and effective intermediaries between the latter and the various development partners (state and financial backers).

However, the fact that NGOs' scope of action at the local community level is limited implies that their impacts are limited as well, compared to the extent of the problems they are trying to solve (Anheier, 1990). This problem of "particularisms" echoes the literature about the "non-profit failure", developed by Salamon (1987). Besides, despite their proximity to the populations, NGOs do not necessarily meet the needs expressed by the "poorest of the poor"; they would rather tend to address the needs of individuals whose income level is slightly higher (Sanyal, 1999). Fall (2003) adds that NGOs' actions remain mainly "experimental" as regards their capacity to help the populations to take charge of themselves and that they only reach a small proportion of destitute population groups. It is consequently legitimate to question the effective accessibility of the actions carried out by NGOs for their target groups, which are generally composed of vulnerable individuals and whom they do not seem to be able to reach, in spite of their presumed assets compared to public institutions.

Finally, Anheier (1990) mentions the fact that, in order to obtain funding from financial backers (in a context of lack of support from the state and instability – or even absence - of own resources), NGOs would attempt to demonstrate their effectiveness and innovative character at all costs, through the production of collective goods or services for the destitute local populations. However, too harsh a competition can be harmful for NGOs' development. NGOs' opportunistic behaviours, linked in such cases to a desire to appropriate part of the external funding, can actually generate a lack of co-operation among NGOs; and an NGO trying to widen one's scale of operations rather than to cooperate with other NGOs is in a dangerous situation, as it can lose its specificity, which is linked to its small size or limited geographic area (Sanyal, 1999). Broadening the scope of their activities indeed forces them to adopt a state-like, bureaucratic organization; it can even threaten their sustainability, as the number of problems they are facing becomes unmanageable (Anheier, 1990).

4.3.2. NPOs have a capacity for social innovation; indeed, they have a greater capacity than the state to mobilize voluntary resources and to produce collective goods at lower cost, and this allows them, in some cases, to precede the action of public authorities in the production of some collective goods and services (Nyssens, 2000).

A certain competition among third sector organizations also seems to favour the development of their capacity for social innovation, inter alia through the voluntary resources that these organizations are able to mobilize. In this context, several NGOs in French-speaking Africa play a pioneering role by preceding the action of public authorities in the production of certain collective goods and services, meeting demands hitherto left unmet, be it because the recipients of the goods or services were not able to pay for them or because they had not yet been identified by the state (Fall, 2003; Nyssens, 2004).

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, solidarity groups are based primarily on voluntary work. Voluntary commitment in the poliomyelitis eradication campaign in Africa provides a concrete example hereof (Poncelet et al., 2006). This enables us to point out the fact that, whenever an NGO is set up, *"what defines commitment is not only a state of mind, an attitude or an intention to act, but also the voluntary action. This commitment is voluntary, insofar as it is based on a choice, or at least on a freely accepted constraint"* (Stangherlin, 2005, p.41).

We can suppose, however, that, in subsistence economies (which characterize most African societies), the voluntary participation in NGOs – inter alia through voluntary practices - can really make sense only when most elementary needs of individuals have been met. The significant influence exerted by the context of analysis on the way in which volunteering is understood and analyzed should thus be underlined. As emphasized by Defourny and Sarambe (2006)⁹, the reasons underlying the decision to become involved as a volunteer vary from one context to another. It is not rare, in the African context, to meet individuals volunteering their time in an association with a view to eventually obtaining a quid pro quo, be it in terms of money or power. Besides, these authors specify that *"it regularly happens that such a voluntary commitment comes to an end when its opportunity cost becomes too high (time not devoted to other activities)"* (Defourny and Sarambe, 2006, p.15).

Becoming involved as a volunteer within an organization (including in the public sector) can also constitute a disguised way to gain access to the labour market, insofar as the voluntary activity allows individuals to develop their competences and to demonstrate their availability. This phenomenon also denotes, however, a certain casualization of employment in the African context of generalized crisis (Fall, 2003).

Some minimal conditions (in terms of time, resources etc.) seem essential for individuals to feel involved and demonstrate a will to take part as volunteers in a third sector organization. It seems indeed that the political context, social conditions and economic systems within which individuals are living can increase or, on the contrary, decrease the probability for individuals to become involved in initiatives implemented by third sector organizations (Debuyst, 2001). In this respect, Fall (2003) adds that we can "observe a diversity of innovating spheres and actors; but they remain partitioned and little recognized in public policies. It is under constraint that creativity and innovation reach their peak" (Fall, 2003, p.66). Fall specifies, however, that the networking of actors and organizations seems difficult, given the multiplicity of individual strategies in African societies. Besides, as we have already underlined, external financial backers seem to be highly influential as regards the conditions for

⁹ It has to be underlined that this study refers to mutual-type organizations set up in West Africa in the field of health insurance. Strictly speaking, these organizations are thus not NGOs, even though they actually belong to the third sector such as it can be defined in the Africa context.

emergence and the configuration of third sector organizations in Africa, through the allocation of material and financial resources to these organizations.

5. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the fact that the transposition of concepts linked to the non-profit literature, which was developed in the North, into the framework of Southern countries in general and of Africa in particular required some caution and some adjustments (see section 3). In order to illustrate and describe, as adequately as possible, the realities observed in Africa (and more specifically in French-speaking Africa), we have chosen to base our analysis on a particular form of third sector organizations which has been developing rapidly in Africa for a few decades, namely non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Besides, it seemed necessary to analyze the evolution of the role of the post-colonial states in African societies since the 1960s, in order to highlight the progressive withdrawal of African states regarding the production of collective goods and services; this evolution allows to account for the major role played by NPOs in this field. The reaction of NPOs in response to the "failure" of public authorities indeed constituted the heart of our analysis (section 4).

The existence of a demand for collective goods and services left unmet by public authorities' limited production seems obvious in African societies. Furthermore, NGOs' credibility in the eyes of the population is based on their autonomy from state institutions, which are now strongly questioned, and have even, in some cases, lost their legitimacy. But NGOs' – relative - independence is strongly questioned when taking into account the significant influence that a new category of actors, namely financial backers, exert on third sector organizations through the allocation of material and financial resources. As a result, many NGOs remain disconnected from local realities. Yet, it is important, whenever a development project is implemented, that the initiatives originate in the populations, in a bottom-up process, and meet these populations' real expectations. A challenge for NGOs consequently consists in initiating a move towards autonomy, in order to get rid of ill-adapted imported development projects, without, however, questioning commitment for "the faraway other" (Stangherlin, 2005) which constitutes the main motivation of the support provided by these financial backers to African NGOs.

Considering this delegation of financing from financial backers to local NGOs for the production of collective goods and services, one can note that NGOs have advantages over public institutions in Africa and are consequently more efficient in meeting the local populations' unmet demands; these comparative advantages are linked in particular to some of their characteristics (small size, proximity and responsiveness) and to their capacity for social innovation (which depends on the mobilization of voluntary resources). However, we moderated our remarks in many ways.

Generally speaking, all these reflections lead us to question the supposed universality of North-American and British theories about the non-profit sector. Taking into account the context of analysis as well as all the actors' strategies constitutes a first important step towards the elaboration and conceptualization of a third-sector theory relating to organizations in Africa (Assogba, 2003; Baron, 2007, Fraisse, 2008). The strong dependency of these organizations on financial backers (and, to a lesser extent, on the state) seems to raise questions as to their autonomy and capacity to meet the local populations' unmet needs in terms of production of collective goods and services, in a context of state failure and corruption.

Although the non-profit literature also praises the necessary interdependence between third sector organizations and the state (since each of these two sectors has its own limits), it seems

premature to contemplate such relations in the African context, in particular in view of the neopatrimonialist and clientelist practises which still characterize public entities and, more generally, African societies. However, the development of NGOs seems to require a favourable framework and the development of partnerships between these organizations and public institutions, if the risk of NGOs' reproducing the already mentioned “failures” of the states in terms of answers to the population's collective needs is to be avoided (Develtere and Fonteneau, 2003).

In conclusion, it would be interesting to dwell upon the logics underlying individual behaviours in the African context or, in other words, to question the socio-economic rationality which characterizes the “homo africanus” in the light of its own realities and types of social organization (Hugon, 2001; Assogba, 2003).

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