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Abstract

“Emergence and roles of non-profit organizations coping with the failure of the post-colonial state in sub-Saharan Africa”

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This paper tackles the question of the transposition of concepts linked to the non-profit literature, developed in the North, into the framework of Southern countries, and of sub-Saharan African countries in particular. The objective of this paper is above all to question the universality of the (demand-side) economic theories from North-American and British literature on the non-profit sector. More precisely, we focus on the theories of “excess demand”, which consider third sector organizations as answers to state failures in the production of collective goods and services.

Indeed, faced with “excess demands” that remain unmet by the “failing” State, non-profit organizations (NPO) step in to meet these demands, which are “residual” in terms of preferences of the median voter regarding the production of collective goods (Weisbrod, 1975). An alternative approach consists in considering that the state deliberately decides to delegate the production of collective goods to non-profit organizations, while ensuring the (at least partial) financing of these goods (James, 1990). We can thus suppose that these organizations have assets, in comparison to public institutions, that justify this phenomenon of “contracting out” of the production of collective goods. First, these comparative advantages can concern the contents of the demand expressed by the population; thanks to their size, proximity and reactivity, NPOs seem to answer more efficiently local populations' demands for collective goods or services that are left unmet by public authorities (Mertens, 2002). Secondly, in comparison to the state, NPOs have a better capacity to mobilize voluntary resources and to produce collective goods at a lower cost. In some cases, NPOs can even constitute innovating approaches by preceding the action of public authorities in the production of certain collective goods and services (Nyssens, 2000).

The main hypothesis put forward in the present paper is that this theoretical corpus does not seem to be adapted to the African context. Thus, this research is based on the observation that the conditions of emergence of NPOs in the South seem to be very different from the *raison d'être* of these organizations in the North. But it is precisely in the North-American and British context of liberal democracy that the non-profit economic theories were conceived and developed. Consequently, it seems reasonable to think that other logics underlie African realities and, therefore, to question the supposed universality of all non-profit economic

theories (Nyssens, 2000). The interest of this article lies in the fact that, generally speaking, few scientific studies¹ currently try to establish a link between the non-profit theoretical corpus explaining the *raisons d'être* of NPOs and third sector organizations in Africa. This article also highlights the increasing influence of a category of external actors in the financing of collective goods and services in the African context, namely financial backers.

To understand the role of NPOs in sub-Saharan Africa, we refer to the conditions which favoured their emergence. In this context, third sector organizations imposed themselves as an alternative solution to a “failing” state, corrupted and strongly questioned (Anheier, 1990). Besides, this demonstrates the relevance of an analysis of NPOs' role in terms of state failure. To support our point concerning the “failure” of African states, we also analyze the evolution of the role of the state in Africa in the last decades; indeed, the state does not seem to play the same role in Africa as in Western societies.

Thus, it seemed relevant to analyze a particular form of third sector organization, namely non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as an illustration of the realities observed within the third sector such as they are experienced in the context of sub-Saharan 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.

Obviously, this paper will have to be tested empirically in the future. However, it is already the result of a collaboration of several months with two African researchers within the framework of the “Chaire Cera” seminar, organized at the University of Liege.

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¹ Examples include the analyses carried out by Anheier (1990), Sanyal (1999), in the book by Defourny and Develtere, and Develtere and Fonteneau (2003), in a special issue of *Economie et Solidarités*.

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