The EU as an emerging coordinator in development cooperation: perspectives from sub-Saharan Africa¹

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This report presents the proceedings of the field research conducted in the framework of a doctoral research on the European Union (EU) as an emerging coordinator in development cooperation. This research aims to seek in-depth and interpreted understanding of the paradox between the EU's ambitions on the one hand and practice on the ground on the other by investigating the EU's role in four sub-Saharan African countries (Tanzania, Zambia, Burkina Faso and Senegal). As such, it aims to add empirical evidence to the debate on the role of the EU as a development actor. More specifically, it investigates how the ambitions of the EU are translated at country level and in which situations the EU is more/less likely to act as a coordinator, making use of a pragmatist research approach. This approach is especially suited to problem-driven research that aims to understand a complex phenomenon. The article introduces the research question and the rationale, gives an overview of the research approach and the methodological considerations and ends with a summary of the research process and the preliminary findings of the field research.

Key words: EU development policy, aid effectiveness, coordination, pragmatism, interview research

Introduction to the research question

Worldwide, for the 46 donors included in OECD-DAC statistics, there are about 3700 donor-partner aid relationships. A quarter of these relationships are classified as micro-aid relationships, which means that they remain below a country level threshold 0.1% of aid (Hacking, 2011:7). Countries with the most donors and highest fragmentation levels are Least Developed Countries. All these donors employ their own strategies, procedures and requirements, which translates into an onerous burden for the partner government. In addition to this, donors apply their own allocation criteria resulting in overlaps or duplication as well as funding gaps or orphan sectors (OECD-DAC, 2009b).

Aid coordination is presented as a guiding principle to help resolve the problem of fragmented aid. Donors and recipients should cooperate collectively to tackle the problem of global poverty. Coordination has been on top of the international develop-

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ment agenda, especially in the past decade, culminating with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005. While no donor will deny the need for better coordination, implementation of international commitments has proven to be difficult as progress remains slow. On the one hand, donor coordination requires certain capacities and a set of bureaucratic changes and aid institutions also face countervailing incentives which make it more difficult to promote coordination. On the other hand, as coordination affects national sovereignty over aid delivery, there are limits to the readiness of donors to engage in coordination and as a result, binding commitments to donor coordination are unlikely. In addition to these elements, ideational issues also play a role as they can either motivate a donor to coordinate or act as obstacles, for example, in cases of disagreement about who should coordinate, what should be coordinated, or with what objective.

The EU, which plays the leading part of my doctoral research, has on many occasions expressed its ambition to drive forward the international agenda on coordination and promote its implementation. Simultaneously, the EU has taken several steps to strengthen internal EU coordination. While the European Commission has for many decades shown a remarkable commitment and enthusiasm towards better coordination, it is only in the past decade that Member States have engaged to step up efforts, symbolized in the European Consensus of 2005 and the Code of Conduct on Complementarity and Division of Labour of 2007. On the one hand, the EU has been portrayed as a potential leading actor in donor coordination, given its long-standing experience with collective action problems. On the other hand, EU coordination may become even more complicated as identities and national interest become more sensitive issues than in looser but more encompassing donor-wide frameworks. Moreover, EU coordination can make it more difficult to promote donor-wide coordination while existing donor-wide coordination can make it more difficult to engage in EU coordination.

To conduct a problem-driven research, "one paradigm is not able to grasp the multiple logics of the complex interactions involved" (Cornut, 2009:18). My research has combined insights from two different "research traditions" (cf. Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009:708-709). On the one hand, researchers have given considerable attention to international donor coordination (Aldasoro, Nunnenkamp, & Thiele, 2010; Bigsten, 2006; de Renzio, Booth, Rogerson, & Curran, 2004; Hayman, 2009; Hyden, 2008; Menocal & Mulley, 2006; Rogerson, 2005; Stern, 2008) and put forward a multitude of factors challenging or stimulating coordination exercises. Development studies' literature on aid effectiveness, donor coordination, aid bureaucracies and institutions thus offers insights into donor coordination in general. In this literature, the EU is at best considered as 'just another donor'.

On the other hand, scholarship on the coordinator role of the EU in development cooperation remains scarce. Existing studies (Arts & Dickson, 2004; Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Bué, 2010; Carbone, 2007, 2010a; Hoebink, 2004; Holtz, 1998; Orbie & Versluys, 2008) focus primarily on the general developments in Brussels and on coordination at an abstract level. The EU's recent policy initiatives have aroused academic interest resulting in policy evaluations (cf. Triple C Evaluations 2004-2008), studies on the link between

coordination and ownership in the EU context (Carbone, 2008, 2010b) and on the feasibility of implementation (Alvarez, 2010; Bué, 2010; Carbone, 2007; Carlsson, Schubert, & Robinson, 2009; Dearden, 2008; Gill & Maxwell, 2004; Mürle, 2007; Schulz, 2007). Recently, some academics (Fredrik Söderbaum, 2010; F. Söderbaum & Stalgren, 2008) have started to look at the implementation of the EU coordination strategies on the ground. These studies suggest that 'European' coordination is limited. While it is recognized that there is an increasing 'Europeanization' in terms of Brussels' made strategies, the situation in the field possibly represents more division than unity among European donors and obstacles and resistance are increasing (Bué 2010). While the EU code of Conduct on Complementarity and Division of Labour is considered as "the most demanding normative framework on Division of Labour so far", "on average the performance of European donors is about the same as [other OECD-DAC donors]" and "some European donors are still amongst the poor performers worldwide" (Bürcky, 2011:32). However, these studies do not examine in greater depth the areas where the EU is more/less successful and no in-depth investigation has been done on the explanations for these findings.

On the one hand, then, the EU emphasizes the aim to engage and lead in coordination exercises but on the other hand the limited empirical evidence suggests it might be unable to effectively act as a coordinating actor in practice. My research aims to seek in-depth and interpreted understanding of this paradox making use of a pragmatist research approach. More specifically, I investigate how the ambitions of the EU are translated at country level and in which situations the EU is more/less likely to act as a coordinator. Through this approach, a diversified spectrum of different coordination roles is proposed, taking into account the different contexts. As the research is of an explorative nature, it aims to increase the knowledge on what EU coordination means in practice. The focus is on the coordinator role of the EU in four sub-Saharan African countries, namely Tanzania, Zambia, Burkina Faso and Senegal. I aim to examine how effective the EU is in deploying its coordinator role and which factors can explain the overall outcome as well as the subtle variations in between the four countries. As such the main research questions of this research are: (i)to what extent is the EU able to act as a coordinator (which coordination and how much?), and (ii) under which circumstances and for what reasons is the EU able to act as a coordinator in development (which factors explain why the EU plays different roles in different contexts?). In the remainder of this article, I will outline the methodological considerations related to a pragmatist research approach as well as the conceptual foundations before summarizing the preliminary findings of the field research.

Pragmatic research approach and methodological considerations

The EU's coordinator role is emergent and the recent but limited studies available suggest a gap between the EU's ambitions and its practices in the field. My research has been of an explorative nature and aims to seek "in-depth and interpreted understanding" (Snape & Spencer, 2003:22) of the EU's coordinator role. Therefore I have employed a

qualitative research approach as this is best suited to "exploring issues that hold some complexity" (Snape & Spencer, 2003: 5) and providing and enabling "orientation" (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009: 716) and explanation. More specifically I have opted for a pragmatic research approach and the explanatory strategy of abduction (cf. Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009).

The pragmatist tradition is characterized by a considerable diversity, translated into "nuanced debates over such issues as the relationship between ontology and epistemology" (Sil, 2009: 648). However, all pragmatists share the belief in the "primacy of practice" (Hellmann, 2009: 639). Pragmatism aims for problem driven and complexity-sensitive research (Cornut, 2009: 2) and insists on its "usefulness" (Cornut, 2009: 4). By focusing on how problems occur in practice, pragmatic research aims to produce practical knowledge. It starts from the assumption that in order to explain a certain phenomenon, a pluralistic model may need to be employed (Rosamond, 2007: 14-17) by combining multiple theoretical insights.

My research process is characterized by a cyclical path, during which literature review, field research, analysis and formulation of the conceptual framework mutually influenced and succeeded each other, guided by the emergent theoretical insights (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009: 717). Like constructivism and different fromin contrast to rationalism, abduction "does not draw on the logic of if-then generalisations" but looks for "constitutive explanations" (Dessler, 2005: 500). To explain a certain phenomenon the researcher may start from a couple of "candidate explanations", in my case derived from the literature on coordination and EU studies, and search for the candidates which best explain the phenomenon. I had found in the literature that the explanations for coordination are mainly attributed to² 1) the political economy of donors (interest-related, institutional and ideal factors), 2) the context in which coordination takes place (donor landscape, existing coordination, donor-government relations), and 3) the role of individuals in the field. These might have either a positive or a negative effect on the EU's coordinator role resulting in that the EU might both have comparative advantages and additional problems regarding coordination. Abduction overcomes the traditional (dichotomous (Hellmann, 2009: 641)) distinction between inductive and deductive approaches: "instead of trying to impose an abstract theoretical template (deduction) or 'simply' inferring propositions from facts (induction)", I have aimed to reason "at an intermediate level (abduction)" (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009: 709). At this level, the researcher collects "pertinent observations" and at the same time applies "concepts from existing fields of knowledge (Friedrichs, 2009: 647).

The goal of the empirical research is thus to discover factors which constitute conditions that further or hinder the EU's coordinator role. This research puts the focus exclusively on sub-Saharan-Africa and EU coordination is investigated from a country

For the sake of completeness, developments at the international or the EU level should be somehow incorporated as "pressures and opportunities arising in the international system can stimulate internal change in each donor organization" (de Renzio et al., 2004: 8). Here both the international level (fora like OECD-DAC, executive boards of multilaterals), the EU level and informal groupings like Like-Minded Countries are important.

perspective as it has been acknowledged that the ongoing efforts by both the donor community and recipient governments in coordination varies from country to country. While abduction is fundamentally based on a holistic understanding of the cases, it is possible to set up a unified set of aspects that shall be covered in every narrative (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009: 715-720). Thus, I have opted for a combination of some form of cross-case analysis and within-case analysis.

The sampling process has been "iterative" in the sense that on the basis of the analysis of the data from the first sample, a further sample can be selected to refine the emerging insights. All the countries selected are aid-dependent countries receiving aid from a large amount of donors. In these countries, coordination becomes much more necessary but the number of donors also involves a greater challenge. Different kinds of tensions and complex interactions are at play in the coordination processes. All countries are part of the EU Fast-Track Initiative on Division of Labour, which shows the EU's commitment towards coordination in these countries. The EU as a whole is the major provider of aid and the Commission is one of the biggest donors. Furthermore, the four countries are reasonably stable countries. According to Hopwood (2009: 117) these relatively well-performing low-income countries which are highly dependent on aid from many different donors form "the central battleground for the aid effectiveness agenda". Unlike failing or conflict-driven states, where the Aid Effectiveness Agenda is seen as less suitable, the selected countries have relatively intact state structures and a certain level of democratic participation. However, contrary to countries such as Rwanda where the level of good governance and institutional capacity enables the government to achieve some ownership, the selected countries have only limited coordination capacities. They are less capable of organizing the complex donor supply side in a coherent way, which makes the role and responsibility of donors more important in strengthening the institutional capacities of the government to enable them to organize aid coordination as well as in coordinating amongst themselves (Faust & Messner, 2007: 22).

To generate data on coordination practices and explain the EU's coordinator role, qualitative in-depth semi-structured expert interviews were judged to be the most appropriate method to gather information on views, attitudes, experiences and perceptions of the EU's coordinator role (cf. Bogner & Menz, 2009). The aim was to gain understanding of the nature of the EU's coordination problems in the field and ultimately develop explanations, as well as ideas and concepts about the EU's coordinator role (cf. Snape & Spencer, 2003: 23). Consequently, the interviews were used to identify concepts, to provide explanations and to verify my emerging insights. I have focused on experts 'in the field' that are marked by an institutional affiliation to donor agencies and government departments within the selected African countries. Interviews have thus been carried out with representatives from EU Delegations, EU Member States and non-EU aid agencies and partner country aid administrations. In the aid agencies interviews were mostly held with the Head of Cooperation or the Country Manager and in some cases with the Head of Mission, a Counsellor, a country or a programme officer. Within the recipient country governments I mainly talked with senior economists in the Ministry of Finance and Na-

tional Planning. All interviews took place at the respective embassies or ministries. The total sample of 100 interviews is still limited, but, typically for qualitative research, has followed the logic of saturation³. Importantly, the aim of my research is not to generalize these findings, but the fact that perceptions of the EU appeared to be fairly homogeneous amongst interviewees within a country, reinforces the validity of the findings. In addition, three field trips and additional interviews in Brussels were conducted and different interviewees were asked about the same issues, in order to verify the obtained interpretations from different perspectives. For each series of interviews I had prepared an interview guide, but the data were generated by means of open and flexible questioning, which allowed me to gather emerging, rich and extensive data (cf. Mason, 2002). Desk research has complemented the insights generated through the interviews, as for each country additional documents and reports such as internal meeting reports, donor matrices, policy documents or institutional evaluations were consulted.

Research process and preliminary findings

In the first phase I explored the role of the EU in two "critical" (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003: 80) countries with similar characteristics, namely Tanzania and Zambia, 4 By minimizing the differences in some of the possible key explanations in the first phase, I was able to generate "much similar data" but also identify rather "subtle differences which would not be caught in heterogenous samples" (Ritchie et al., 2003: 81). Tanzania and Zambia have both been portrayed as best practices or model cases for donor coordination. There are several facilitating operational coordination frameworks in place, while the EU has a clear ambition to play a central role in donor coordination and improve internal EU coordination. These countries were possibly "pivotal" to study the specific added value of the EU as findings on the EU's coordinator role in these countries might be "critical to any understanding offered by the research" (Ritchie et al., 2003: 80). In Tanzania and Zambia all the traditional bilateral and multilateral donors have signed a Joint Assistance Strategy and are participating in a donor-wide coordination platform. Moreover, in both countries, EU donors are mainly Nordic Plus donors whose participation in the Division of Labour is also guided by their specific "complementarity principles". The field research pointed to a limited coordinator role for the EU.5 While in both countries the EU Delegations were recognized as active and ambitious entities which are keen on establishing more EU coordination, Member States perceived the EU's initiatives as superfluous, hardly bringing any added value to the existing coordination processes.

The emerging insights showed that, while the political economy of the EU's internal aid architecture involves several challenges that might remain constant independent of

³ The sample size is determined by the moment very little if any new evidence is gathered through the interviews.

⁴ It should be added that, apart from the described theoretical relevance, also more pragmatic considerations have played a role in the selection of countries.

⁵ For an extensive analysis of the EU's coordinator role in Tanzania and Zambia, see Delputte & Söderbaum (2012).

the context, the local donor composition and level of existing coordination might be more important explanatory factors and possibly divide the research field into further domains. If these 'educated guesses' prove to be true, the EU might perform better in settings where the existing coordination is less advanced and the EU donors represented are mainly 'Europe-minded' donors. In Tanzania and Zambia, these factors are too similar to be able to explore possible differences with a significant degree of confidence, so it was necessary to select supplementary countries in which these differences are maximized in order to "facilitate the collection of diverse data which may then uncover similarities" (Ritchie et al., 2003: 81-86). Consequently, to see whether these explanations are valid, I decided to look at two West African countries, Burkina Faso and Senegal, where the existing coordination is less advanced⁶ and the EU donors represented are mainly 'Europe-minded' instead of 'Nordic Plus' donors. In such countries there might be more opportunities and possible added value for the EU to manifest itself as a 'coordinator champion'.

On the basis of a preliminary analysis of the EU's emerging coordinator role at the country level in West-Africa, we can observe that both in Burkina Faso and in Senegal the EU's coordinator role is less contested. EU coordination may lead to common positions and these were not perceived as a hindrance for ongoing coordination efforts. The EU is especially active on the 'institution-building' of the donor coordination architecture and on the facilitation of dialogue through the coordination of diverging positions. In Burkina Faso, in particular, the EU was seen as a major pioneer in the field of coordination and an actor which was able to facilitate dialogue amongst donors and between donors and the government through its active engagement in the creation and the functioning of a Troika system and the monitoring of the national development strategy and budget support. The EU Delegation not only focuses its efforts on internal EU coordination but it also reaches out to the wider donor community in an effort to further the broader coordination exercise. However, it seems that the coordinator role of the EU in Burkina Faso might be more developed than in Senegal. Arguably, here, a subtle variation in the EU donor composition and the nature of the donor government relations may come into play. First, in Burkina Faso, the EU Institutions constitute the biggest EU donor while in Senegal, France has remained the first amongst EU donors and France's stance towards EU coordination has been more supportive in Burkina Faso than in Senegal. Second, in recent years Senegal has adopted a more conflict-based approach in its relations with the EU, while Burkina Faso has demonstrated a more consensual stance (cf. Van Criekinge, 2009). Senegal has used conflict strategies to seek more independence from its traditional partners (mainly France) and has been looking for alternative partners such as China, India and Arab states. Moreover, especially since the 2008-2009 donor-government crisis, debates on development cooperation and politics are very much linked. Consequently, taking into account the degree of power asymmetry between the EU and the partner country may offer additional insights on the EU's coordinator role.

AFRIKA FOCUS — 2013-06 [105]

⁶ However, in Burkina Faso ongoing efforts towards coordination are more straightforward than in Senegal.

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AFRIKA FOCUS — 2013-06 [107]