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**Building a sustainable European Union - African Union partnership:
The role of civil Society Organizations in shaping the Joint Vision for
2030**

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Master's thesis

**Building a sustainable European Union – African Union
partnership: The role of civil Society Organizations in
shaping the Joint Vision for 2030**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in shaping the EU-AU partnership and the "Joint Vision for 2030" adopted at the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022. Applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as a theoretical lens, the study assesses how CSOs influence decision-making and enhance cooperation between the regions. The qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives and document analysis of position papers and official statements, highlights the Africa-Europe Foundation as a key case study. Findings indicate a shift towards a holistic approach to sustainable development, aligning with the Foundation's advocacy and the 2022 summit's priorities. The study concludes that CSOs play crucial roles as knowledge brokers, policy entrepreneurs, and advocates, contributing to more accountable and responsive policies. However, challenges remain in ensuring effective CSO engagement. This research enriches the literature on interregional partnerships, civil society inclusion, and the impact of think tanks on foreign policy, offering insights for policymakers, CSOs, and researchers.

Keywords: EU-AU partnership, civil society organizations, Africa-Europe Foundation, Advocacy Coalition Framework, decision-making processes, sustainable development



List of acronyms and abbreviations

ACF = Advocacy Coalition Framework

AEF = Africa-Europe Foundation

AU = African Union

CEPS = Centre for European Policy Studies

CSDN = Civil Society Dialogue Network

CSDP = Common Security and Defence Policy

CSO = Civil Society Organisation

EEAS = European External Action Service

EU = European Union

EPC = European Policy Centre

JAES = Joint Africa-EU Strategy

NGO = Non Gouvernemental Organisation

OAU = Organisation of African Unity

SDA = Security and Defence Agenda

SIPRI = Swedish International Peace Research Institute



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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Significance of the EU-AU Partnership

"Africa and Europe are bound by geography and a common destiny. The EU-Africa partnership is of utmost importance to shape our future" (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.).

This statement, made by President Ursula von der Leyen during the African Union (AU)-European Union (EU) Commission-to-Commission meeting on November 28, 2022, underscores the European commitment to cooperate with its African counterpart and to co-construct a sustainable partnership.

The partnership between Africa and Europe is based on close collaboration between the EU and the AU, while also involving non-governmental organizations, civil society representatives, youth groups, economic and social actors, and the private sector (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.). In this context, a 'Joint Vision for 2030' was adopted at the 6th EU-AU Summit in February 2022. This initiative aims to bring the two continents closer together by strengthening their economic cooperation and promoting sustainable development, paving the way for a partnership that will shape the future of both regions.

In the current context, marked by agricultural crises and the need to combat climate change, international cooperation between the two continents is more crucial than ever. These challenges reveal the interdependencies and the necessity for collaboration between Africa and Europe to address today's common problems effectively.

The involvement of civil society in the discussions and decision-making processes of the EU-AU partnership is essential to establishing an equal relationship and meeting upcoming challenges. Civil society organizations bring unique perspectives and valuable expertise, ensuring that the voices and needs of the populations are considered. Their participation contributes to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the partnership, ensuring that policies and programs reflect the realities on the ground.

However, the meaningful inclusion of civil society in the EU-AU partnership remains a challenge. Obstacles include resource constraints, linguistic and cultural barriers, and sometimes restrictive political environments (Mbaya, 2023). Overcoming these obstacles requires concerted commitment from both the EU and the AU to create accessible and effective

participation mechanisms, strengthen the capacities of civil society organizations, and foster an environment conducive to their engagement (AEF, 2023).

By placing civil society at the heart of the EU-AU partnership, the two unions can build a more equitable, resilient, and future-oriented relationship. This inclusive approach is essential for addressing common challenges, promoting sustainable development, and shaping a better future for the peoples of Africa and Europe.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

This research aims to assess the effectiveness of the EU-AU Joint Partnership in including civil society organizations in the decision-making process.

How do CSOs influence decision-making processes within the EU-AU partnership? How can the effective inclusion of civil society in the EU-AU partnership improve cooperation?

These questions are critical to understanding whether rhetorical commitments to inclusion are translating into practice and to holding the partnership accountable to its stated goals. Understanding what works and what does not in terms of CSO influence and inclusion provides guidance on how to effectively involve civil society. This can contribute to the development of more targeted and impactful initiatives to strengthen the partnership.

1.3. Contextual Background of the EU-AU Partnership

1.3.1. Historical Evolution of the EU-AU Partnership

The partnership between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) has undergone significant evolution over the past two decades. Officially established during the first Africa-EU Summit in Cairo in 2000, this partnership is guided by the Joint Africa-EU Strategy adopted in 2007 (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.). Key milestones have marked its development, including the second Africa-EU Summit in Lisbon in 2007, which formalized the collaborative path between the two unions, and the third summit in Tripoli in 2010, which defined the main areas of cooperation, such as migration, mobility, and employment (ibid.).

The relationship between Europe and Africa is deeply rooted in colonial history, creating complex and unique ties between the two continents (Chabal, 2010). Despite efforts by



African elites to break free from this past, the EU remains the main trading partner for sub-Saharan Africa and a major source of development aid (Taylor, 2016). However, the end of the Cold War and changes in the international system have impacted this relationship, notably with the integration and enlargement of the EU, which have relegated concerns about Africa's development to the background (Zielonka, 2001).

Despite these differences, the Africa-EU partnership has continued to evolve, notably with the 5th AU-EU Summit in Abidjan in 2017, which aimed to strengthen economic cooperation and promote sustainable development (Miyandazi et al., 2018). More recently, at the 6th EU-AU Summit in Brussels in February 2022, a "Joint Vision for 2030" was adopted with the aim of bringing the two continents closer together.

Today, this partnership involves not only the member states of the EU and the AU but also various non-state actors such as civil society organizations, youth groups, and the private sector. However, the effective inclusion of civil society in the decision-making processes remains a major challenge in building a truly sustainable and equitable partnership between Europe and Africa.

1.3.2. Developments post-6th EU-AU Summit

The 6th EU-AU Summit, held in Brussels on February 17 and 18, 2022, marked a decisive turning point in the partnership between the two unions. African and European leaders adopted a common vision for 2030, aiming to strengthen economic cooperation and promote sustainable development (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.). The summit sought to redefine the partnership as an equal relationship and to move away from a donor-recipient dynamic focused on development aid (McNair, 2022). It also aimed to respond to the growing geopolitical interests of China, India, Russia, and other countries in Africa (ibid.).

The EU has committed, through the Global Gateway Africa-Europe initiative, to provide an investment package of 150 billion euros for Africa by 2027, targeting key sectors such as health, digital, climate, and energy (EEAS, 2023). Concrete examples include rural electrification in Burkina Faso, digital transformation in Nigeria, and vaccine manufacturing in South Africa, Senegal, and Ghana (ibid.). The EU also remains the largest provider of development aid to Africa.

However, tensions persist around the partnership's value agenda, the unilateral application of standards by the EU, and the need to make further progress in trade and investment (ECDPM, 2023). The postponement of the third AU-EU ministerial meeting at the end of 2023 has demonstrated the fragility of the partnership (ibid.). Challenges include Africa's desire to be treated as an equal partner rather than a recipient of aid, and the need for African countries to better articulate their own strategic priorities (McNair, 2022).

The absence of common definitions, processes, and objectives for monitoring the partnership remains a challenge, exacerbated by the lack of data, particularly from member states (AEF, 2023). Effective monitoring is necessary to translate the ambitious commitments of the 6th Summit into action. The period 2023-2024 is pivotal for strengthening cooperation at the transcontinental and multilateral levels, with promising areas such as carbon markets, renewable energies, ocean governance, and the blue economy (AEF, 2023). The EU-AU partnership has the potential to jointly lead the transformation of global systems, but it is necessary to translate dialogue into concrete actions.

1.3.3. Civil society's role in the EU-AU partnership

The 6th EU-AU Summit underscored the significance of civil society in the partnership between the two unions. The "Joint Vision for 2030" adopted aims to bring the two continents closer by enhancing economic cooperation and promoting sustainable development, while involving non-state actors such as civil society organizations, youth groups, and the private sector (Council of the EU, 2022).

On the sidelines of the summit, over 20,000 individuals from Europe, Africa, and beyond participated in the first Africa-Europe Week and the 7th EU-Africa Business Forum (EABF), providing a platform for youth, civil society, cultural actors, and the private sector to discuss aspects of the partnerships that matter most to them (European Commission, 2021). The Africa-EU Civil Society Forum, an integral part of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), brings together representatives from African and European CSOs to present their views to leaders on critical issues (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.).

Think tanks play a pivotal role in the partnership by providing policy analysis, fostering dialogue, and proposing solutions (AEF, 2023). The Africa-Europe Foundation, established in 2020, aims to facilitate a shift in discourse on the relations between Africa and Europe (ibid.).



It manages strategic groups in priority sectors such as health, digital, transport, agriculture, and energy to reframe the relationship. The Foundation works in coordination with sectoral working groups established in 2018 as part of the Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs (AEF, 2023). It serves as a platform for experts to convene and discuss key issues, helping to bridge the gap between policy and implementation (Demes, 2009).

However, despite these efforts, the effective inclusion of civil society in decision-making processes remains a major challenge in building a truly sustainable and equitable partnership between Europe and Africa (Miyandazi et al., 2018). The obstacles that need to be considered to understand and address these challenges include resource constraints, language and cultural barriers, restrictive policy environments, a lack of institutional mechanisms, inadequate representation, differing priorities and interests, limited buy-in from policymakers, and short-term commitment (ibid.). One piece of evidence is the implementation of restrictive laws on foreign funding in some countries within the EU and AU, which can severely limit the capacity of CSOs to function effectively and engage in international partnerships like the EU-AU partnership (Mbaya, 2023).

The EU and AU must go beyond mere rhetoric and genuinely attempt to reconcile divergent viewpoints to ensure the monitoring and implementation of agreements (ibid.). It is critical to increase both parties' ownership of the implementation of common frameworks and policies. The future of the EU-AU partnership depends on the ability to translate dialogue into concrete actions and to meaningfully involve civil society in all its diversity (ECDPM, 2023).

1.4. Societal relevance of the study

The societal implications of this research are extensive, as it examines the effectiveness of including civil society in the EU-AU partnership, a crucial factor in shaping the future of relations between Africa and Europe and sustainable development across both continents. This study provides valuable insights for a wide range of stakeholders. African and European policymakers can benefit from a better understanding of the impact of CSOs like the Africa-Europe Foundation on decision-making processes to effectively incorporate civil society perspectives into the partnership. This can inform the design of more inclusive and effective partnership frameworks (McNair, 2022).



Furthermore, this could enable CSOs, including youth groups, economic and social actors, and the private sector, to discover how their voices can be amplified in the EU-AU partnership through engagement with think tanks and multi-stakeholder platforms to effectively advocate their priorities (AEF, 2023). The Africa-Europe Foundation and other CSOs focused on Africa-Europe relations will benefit from an assessment of their influence and potential to bridge the gap between policy and implementation. They will gain from an analysis of their impact and recommendations to enhance their role as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs (Demes, 2009). Finally, citizens of Africa and Europe have a stake in the outcomes of the EU-AU partnership, as it impacts issues such as economic development, migration, climate change, peace, and security that affect their daily lives (Miyandazi et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the potential impact of this research is significant. Notably, the findings can inform the design of more inclusive and effective EU-AU partnership frameworks, ensuring that the voices of diverse stakeholders are heard in decision-making processes. This can lead to policies that better reflect the needs and aspirations of African and European citizens (ECDPM, 2023).

By examining the role of think tanks in shaping the EU-AU partnership, this study can contribute to strengthening economic cooperation between the two continents. Inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement can help identify areas of common interest and foster mutually beneficial trade and investment (AEF, 2023).

Moreover, the EU-AU partnership plays a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals on both continents. Understanding how the inclusion of civil society can enhance this partnership can contribute to more effective collaboration on issues such as poverty reduction, climate action, and gender equality. The study could identify ways to better align the EU-AU partnership with the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063, ensuring that the partnership contributes to long-term sustainable development on both continents (ECDPM, 2023).

Finally, inclusive decision-making processes that involve diverse civil society voices are a cornerstone of democratic governance. This study can shed light on how the EU-AU partnership can become more democratic and responsive to citizens' needs (Miyandazi et al., 2018). Africa and Europe face many common challenges, from climate change to migration to youth



unemployment. An effective EU-AU partnership that includes civil society perspectives is essential for addressing these challenges in a collaborative and sustainable manner (McNair, 2022). By examining the influence of CSOs like the Africa-Europe Foundation, this research contributes to greater transparency and accountability in the EU-AU partnership, helping to ensure that it serves the public interest (AEF, 2023).

In an increasingly interconnected world, the fates of Africa and Europe are intertwined. The general public has a stake in fostering a strong and equitable partnership between the two continents that can deliver benefits for all. The EU-AU partnership has significant implications for the future of both continents, from economic development to climate change and migration. The general public has a stake in ensuring that this partnership is effective, inclusive, and responsive to their needs and concerns (ECDPM, 2023).

By examining the effectiveness of civil society inclusion in the EU-AU partnership through the lens of the Africa-Europe Foundation, this research aims to contribute to a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable partnership between Africa and Europe. The insights generated can inform policy-making and enhance intercontinental cooperation.

1.5. Academic relevance of the study

This research aims to make significant contributions to the fields of public administration and foreign policy by examining the role of CSOs in shaping interregional partnerships and the inclusion of civil society in decision-making processes.

In the realm of public administration, this study offers new insights into the dynamics of multi-actor partnerships and the challenges of inclusive governance in an international context. By analyzing the impact of the Africa-Europe Foundation on the EU-AU partnership, this research illuminates the mechanisms through which CSOs can influence public policies and administration. The study contributes to the literature on collaborative governance by examining how the EU and AU engage with non-state actors in the formulation and implementation of their joint partnership (Miyandazi et al., 2018). It provides a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with involving diverse stakeholders in complex political processes.



Furthermore, this research adds to the growing body of knowledge on the role of think tanks as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs in public administration (Demes, 2023). By examining how the Africa-Europe Foundation bridges the gap between research and policy, and how it advocates for specific policy solutions, this study provides valuable insights into the strategies and impact of think tanks in shaping public policy.

In the field of foreign policy, this research makes a significant contribution by analyzing the dynamics of interregional partnerships and the role of non-state actors in shaping these partnerships. The EU-AU partnership serves as a crucial case study for understanding how two regional blocs can cooperate on shared challenges and opportunities, and how this cooperation is influenced by a range of actors beyond national governments (McNair, 2022). The study offers new perspectives on the foreign policy strategies of the EU and AU, and how these strategies are shaped by the input and influence of think tanks like the Africa-Europe Foundation (AEF, 2023). It will examine how the Foundation's work on key sectors such as health, digital, transport, agriculture, and energy contributes to the broader vision and priorities of the EU-AU partnership.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the literature on the democratization of foreign policy by examining the role of civil society in shaping the EU-AU partnership (Miyandazi et al., 2018). It will analyze the extent to which the partnership includes the voices and perspectives of various civil society actors, and how this inclusion (or lack thereof) impacts the legitimacy and effectiveness of the partnership.

This study is unique in its specific focus on the role of the Africa-Europe Foundation in shaping the EU-AU partnership. While there is a growing body of research on think tanks and civil society in foreign policy, few studies have examined their impact on interregional partnerships, particularly in the context of Africa-Europe relations.

The research challenges existing beliefs about the primacy of national governments in foreign policy by highlighting the influential role of non-state actors. It also questions assumptions that the EU-AU partnership is purely intergovernmental, emphasizing the importance of civil society inclusion for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the partnership.

Moreover, by applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework to analyze the impact of the Africa-Europe Foundation, this study offers a novel theoretical approach to understanding the role of



CSOs in foreign policy. It combines perspectives from public policy, international relations, and organizational studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how they operate as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs in complex, multi-actor partnerships (Demes, 2023).

1.6. Thesis Structure Overview

This thesis is structured into five main chapters. Following this introductory chapter, which has outlined the research puzzle, questions, background, and relevance, Chapter 2 delves into the theoretical framework. It begins with a literature review examining the definition of civil society organizations, the role of think tanks in interregional partnerships, civil society inclusion in peacebuilding and decision-making, challenges and opportunities for think tanks and civil society, and their advocacy strategies at the European Union and African Union levels. The chapter then presents the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as the main theoretical lens, complemented by the concepts of think tanks as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs. Chapter 3 outlines the research design, detailing the qualitative approach and the selection of the Africa-Europe Foundation as a pivotal case study. It describes the data collection methods, which include semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives and document analysis of policy briefs, official statements, and joint frameworks. The chapter also explains the data analysis methods, involving coding, thematic analysis, content analysis, and synthesis of findings. Chapter 4 presents the findings and analysis. It starts with the findings from the document analysis, tracing the evolution of the EU-AU partnership between the 5th and 6th summits and the influence of the Africa-Europe Foundation. It then presents the results from the qualitative interviews and questionnaires, organized thematically according to the key code-names of the ACF, and synthesizes the different data to analyze the Foundation's role as a significant advocacy coalition and the limitations and avenues for the theoretical framework. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings, reflecting on the theory used and the entire research process, and offering policy recommendations to enhance the inclusion and impact of CSOs in the EU-AU partnership. Throughout the thesis, the analysis is guided by the ACF, examining how the Africa-Europe Foundation and other CSOs influence the EU-AU partnership through their roles as knowledge brokers, policy entrepreneurs, and advocates. By shedding light on the dynamics and challenges of civil society inclusion in



interregional partnerships, this research aims to contribute to more effective and inclusive cooperation between the European Union and the African Union.



2. Conceptual foundations

2.1 Literature review

2.1.1. Definition of civil society organizations

The definition of civil society and civil society organizations (CSOs) varies across contexts and academic sources. According to the European Commission, civil society is defined as "the aggregate of organizational structures whose members have social objectives and responsibilities and who act largely autonomously from the state" (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). This definition encompasses a variety of organizations that play an active role in the public domain, contributing to policy formation, service provision, and the promotion of the general interest. Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and think tanks are sometimes difficult to delineate, and because the latter also contribute to the creation of a European public space, they are included in the definition of CSOs (Dembinski & Joachim, 2014).

The definition of civil society and civil society organizations (CSOs) according to the African Union (AU) is established in the statutes of the Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the AU. ECOSOCC is an advisory body of the AU designed to provide a space for African CSOs to participate in the Union's policies and programs. According to the Constitutive Act of the African Union, a CSO is defined as a civil society organization that operates autonomously from the state and is engaged in activities aimed at promoting social or community objectives (ECOSOCC, 2004). CSOs include a variety of social and professional groups within member states, including non-governmental organizations, trade unions, women's groups, youth, children, the diaspora, the private sector, and professional groups (ibid.).

Think tanks are independent, often nonprofit, organizations that conduct research, analysis, and debate on complex public policy issues, helping shape the thinking of policymakers (McGann, 2005). This broad definition aligns with the notion that think tanks are civil society organizations, as they are primarily non-governmental entities engaged in the production and delivery of social analysis to policymakers and the wider public with the aim of influencing policy (Jeziarska, 2020). They aim to influence policy in a given direction, positioning them within the broader civil society landscape due to their advocacy, research, and policy

development activities. However, there is a noted reluctance among some think tanks to fully identify with the civil society label, as they navigate an interstitial space between politics, civil society, media, market, and academia (ibid.). In this research, we assume that think tanks are an integral part of civil society organizations.

2.1.2. The Role of Think Tanks in Interregional Partnerships

Think tanks play a pivotal role in interregional partnerships by providing political analysis, research, and recommendations that inform decision-making processes. They act as bridges between policy ideas and their implementation, offer spaces for high-level discussions, educate on global issues, and complement official efforts to mediate and resolve conflicts (Demes, 2023).

Think tanks synthesize and disseminate knowledge to stakeholders, bridging the gap between research, policy-making, and practice. They provide expert analysis and data that inform policy discussions and help frame issues in ways that are actionable for policymakers (Craft & Howlett, 2013). As knowledge brokers, think tanks synthesize and disseminate complex academic research into actionable policy advice, thereby enhancing the quality of decision-making (ibid.). Effective framing of issues by policy entrepreneurs can align public perceptions and policymakers' attitudes with the think tank's goals, facilitating policy adoption (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). Think tanks that engage in strategic framing of issues are more likely to influence policy changes. By framing issues in a way that resonates with current policy priorities or public sentiments, think tanks can effectively shape policy discussions and outcomes.

Think tanks actively engage in the policy process by advocating for specific changes. They use windows of opportunity to influence policy agendas and the direction of policy debates. Their strategies include lobbying, public campaigns, and mobilizing public opinion to advocate for their policy preferences (Kingdon, 1984; Christopoulos, 2006). Policy entrepreneurs use their resources, strategic insights, and networks to influence policy agendas and mobilize public and political support for specific policy changes (ibid.).

European think tanks, through their networks and online platforms, are beginning to shape an emerging "European public sphere," influencing the expectations and perceptions of citizens regarding EU policies (Stone & Denham, 2004). This influence also extends to the recruitment

of policymakers, with a growing trend of drawing from think tanks for positions within European institutions (Missiroli & Ioannides, 2012). These external policy advisors are gaining importance, bringing diverse expertise and fresh perspectives to political debates.

European think tanks are also diversifying their activities to address a wider range of topics, reflecting the increasing complexity of EU policies. Despite the difficulty in quantifying their influence, it is clear that European think tanks are expanding, both in number and influence. Their contribution to the European political debate is becoming increasingly significant, adding new voices and perspectives, and thereby enriching European democracy (Missiroli & Ioannides, 2012).

Specifically, in the context of Africa-Europe relations, think tanks such as the Africa-Europe Foundation play a crucial role in facilitating a shift in the discourse surrounding the partnership. They operate strategic groups focusing on priority sectors such as health, digital, transport, agriculture, and energy to reframe the relationship (Africa-Europe Foundation, 2023). These strategic groups serve as platforms where experts can convene and discuss key issues, thereby helping to bridge the gap between policy and implementation.

Taking initiatives to deal with the EU's international challenges is of concern to the European Commission and inputs from various think tanks are listened (Grajewski, 2023). The European Parliament Think Tank provided a briefing that included links to recent reports and commentaries from major international think tanks on the EU's global challenges (ibid.). This indicates that think tanks have played a role in shaping discussions and providing research that supports the development and implementation of EU foreign policy.

In general, the literature on the influence of interest groups in foreign and security policy at the EU level remains limited, with most interest groups orbiting around the European Commission and the European Parliament, which might be more receptive but have limited powers in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Lovato, 2021). This indicates a need for further research on how think tanks navigate the complex institutional landscape of the EU to shape policy in the context of interregional partnerships.

2.1.3. Civil Society Inclusion in Peacebuilding and Decision-Making

The literature on the inclusion of civil society in peacebuilding and decision-making processes emphasizes the importance of meaningful participation and influence (Arbete,

2023). Inclusive outcomes are seen as "as much a culture as a contract," highlighting the need for greater tolerance, social cohesion, and violence prevention (ibid.). Key aspects of inclusion include the extent and quality of participation by groups typically excluded from decision-making processes, as well as the mechanisms that enable them to influence these processes.

The inclusion of civil society in peacebuilding and decision-making is crucial for ensuring inclusive and sustainable outcomes (Carl, 2019). The literature underscores the significance of civil society's meaningful and influential participation, often described as "as much a culture as a contract," thus underscoring the necessity for increased tolerance, social cohesion, and violence prevention (ibid.).

The literature also highlights "the importance of agency"—not merely being consulted in "invited spaces," but what civil society can achieve on its own terms in "claimed spaces" (Cohen & Arato, 1994). Processes emerging from local initiatives in various forms are seen as vital complements to formal negotiations. The analysis of nonviolent resistance also offers valuable lessons for peacebuilders on mass action tactics, power analysis, protection, and building movements relevant to civil society inclusion (Guerra Rondón & Bosch, 2023).

The resolution of conflict in Northern Ireland, epitomized by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, stands as a significant illustration of the pivotal role played by non-governmental entities in diplomatic and peace-oriented endeavors (Conciliation Resources, 2023). This process aimed to resolve the protracted period of strife termed "The Troubles," characterized by violent clashes between nationalist (predominantly Irish or Catholic) and unionist (predominantly British or Protestant) factions (ibid.). Throughout the Northern Ireland peace process, civil society emerged as a crucial bridge over deeply entrenched historical and cultural schisms. Their active engagement ensured that the peace-building initiatives were all-encompassing, addressing the concerns and aspirations of the entire populace rather than just the political or militant groups (Ward, 2009). This instance underscores the significance of civil society in diplomatic and peace-building initiatives, emphasizing that sustainable peace necessitates the active participation of all societal segments, including grassroots organizations and non-state actors. The Northern Ireland peace process serves as an emblematic case of how civil society can complement formal diplomatic endeavors, contributing to enduring peace and reconciliation.

2.1.4. Challenges and Opportunities for Think Tanks and Civil Society

Several challenges for think tanks and civil society emerge from the literature. These include regulatory barriers to recognition or registration, funding constraints, limited access to decision-makers, and threats to the safety and legitimacy of civil society actors (Mbaya, 2023). In some contexts, governments have attempted to establish parallel networks of government-supported CSOs rather than working with independent representatives (ibid.). Tensions between the technical and political aspects of decision-making processes, as well as insufficient government buy-in, are also noted as challenges (ibid.).

Internationally, civil society faces bureaucratic, logistical, and resource barriers that hinder participation (Mbaya, 2023). Technological capacity disparities pose barriers to participation and result in lower visibility and engagement for some CSOs (ibid.). The rapid pace of international processes also poses challenges to meaningful civil society engagement, as multi-sectoral networks take time to form and have fewer resources to respond (ibid.).

Despite these challenges, the literature also points to opportunities for think tanks and civil society to shape interregional partnerships and decision-making processes. These include providing independent policy analysis and advice to inform decision-making, reframing narratives and setting agendas around key issues and sectors, and convening diverse stakeholders and facilitating dialogue and problem-solving (Demes, 2009).

Furthermore, think tanks and CSOs can play a crucial role in promoting transparency and accountability within interregional partnerships. By monitoring the implementation of policies and programs, providing independent evaluations, and holding decision-makers accountable for their commitments, they can help ensure that partnerships serve the public interest (Mbaya, 2023).

Finally, think tanks and CSOs have the potential to bridge the gap between international decision-making processes and local realities. By bringing the perspectives and experiences of affected communities into political deliberations, they can contribute to more responsive partnerships that are grounded in the needs and aspirations of citizens (Mbaya, 2023).

2.1.5. Advocating at the European Union level

Civil society organizations (CSOs) at the EU level are a significant component of the EU's decision-making system and receive substantial attention in the literature. Existing research on EU foreign policy lobbying demonstrates a variety of groups engaged in such



activities, including NGOs and think tanks, business interests, diaspora groups, and solidarity movements (Voltolini, 2017). These organizations consist of individuals operating within the context of structured interactions at the EU level, namely, interactions between political and bureaucratic institutions and non-state actors (Ruzza, 2015).

After Washington, Brussels is considered the city with the highest density of CSOs (Greenwood, 2011). The European Commission increasingly promotes NGO activities in foreign policy, particularly regarding cross-cutting issues such as conflict prevention and peacebuilding (Dembinski & Joachim, 2014). For instance, as early as 1997, the Commission launched and funded the Conflict Prevention Network, followed by the Conflict Prevention Partnership in 2005, a one-year pilot project (Rummel, 2003). In 2007, the Commission initiated and supported the NGO "Initiative for Peacebuilding," and in July 2010, its successor, the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) (Dembinski & Joachim, 2014).

Although the European Parliament is considered by most experts to be limited to "generating information" regarding security policy, CSO representatives nevertheless maintain close ties with certain MEPs and the Committee on Foreign Affairs (Peters et al., 2010). MEPs regularly attend dialogue meetings organized by CSOs and rely on them for expertise (Dembinski & Joachim, 2014).

The Council and its bureaucracies, as well as the presidency, are particularly attractive access points for CSOs concerning the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). National governments and members of the Council bureaucracy have learned that engaging with CSOs has benefits, and they can profit from the expertise of these organizations (Dembinski & Joachim, 2014). For example, in 2006, the Political and Security Committee adopted recommendations to enhance cooperation with NGOs in the framework of EU civilian crisis management (Gourlay, 2006).

EU presidents also seek the views of CSOs when preparing their portfolios or utilizing their advocacy role once in office. For instance, when the Dutch presidency declared harmonizing national reporting as one of its priorities, it tasked the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) with compiling a report on the deficiencies of existing reporting practices (Bauer and Bromley, 2004).

2.1.6. Advocating at the African Union level



The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in shaping the policies and decisions of the African Union (AU), particularly in foreign policy, has emerged as a growing area of research in recent years. Scholars have examined the various mechanisms through which CSOs engage with the AU, the challenges they face, and the impact of their advocacy efforts.

Since the transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the AU in 2002, researchers have noted an increasing space for CSO participation in AU processes (Chitiga & Manby, 2009). The AU's Constitutive Act recognizes the role of civil society in achieving the Union's objectives (AU, n.d.). The Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), established in 2004, serves as an advisory organ to facilitate CSO contributions to AU policies and programs (ECOSOCC, 2004).

However, the effectiveness of these formal engagement mechanisms has been questioned. Mbaya (2023) argues that while avenues exist for CSOs to engage with the AU, they struggle to do so effectively due to limited resources, capacity constraints, and inconsistent access to decision-makers. The AU's commitment to inclusive participation has also been criticized as more rhetorical than substantive (OXFAM, 2016).

Informal channels of influence, such as personal networks and behind-the-scenes lobbying, often have more impact than formal consultative processes (Mbaya, 2023). CSOs with close ties to AU officials or member state governments tend to have more influence (CSO Engagement With the African Union, n.d.). This raises concerns about the representativeness and accountability of CSO participation.

Despite these challenges, researchers have documented cases where CSOs have successfully shaped AU policies and decisions, such as Agenda 2063, the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (Murithi, 2023). In the realm of peace and security, CSOs have contributed to early warning systems, mediation efforts, and post-conflict reconstruction (Shire, 2012). However, the African Union's Peace and Security Council remains largely closed to direct engagement with CSOs (Mbaya, 2023).

2.2. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework aims to explore the role of the CSOs in the decision-making processes of the EU-AU partnership. Utilizing the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

developed by Sabatier (1988), this study will examine the interplay between decision-makers, think tanks, and other stakeholders within this complex international partnership. This framework is particularly suited to studying complex policy environments like the EU-AU partnership, where multiple actors including think tanks, governmental bodies, and civil society organizations interact within a dynamic policy landscape.

Another framework to understand how think tanks contribute to shaping the policies and decisions within this interregional partnership is the distinction to make between knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs.

2.2.1. Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

The ACF is particularly suited for analyzing policy changes where multiple actors and coalitions are involved over extended periods. It posits that actors within a policy subsystem, which includes various stakeholders from the public and private sectors, are motivated by shared beliefs, and that these actors form coalitions to translate these beliefs into actionable policies (Sabatier, 1988).

The first step in applying the ACF is to identify the array of stakeholders involved in the EU-AU partnership. This includes key actors from both the European Union and the African Union, think tanks such as the Africa-Europe Foundation, civil society organizations, and private sector participants. Each of these stakeholders brings unique perspectives and resources to the partnership, influencing the policy agenda and outcomes in distinct ways.

The ACF emphasizes the importance of understanding the belief systems of the different coalitions involved in the policy process. For this research, it is crucial to analyze the core beliefs and policy positions of think tanks like the Africa-Europe Foundation and how these align or conflict with the positions of other major actors within the EU and AU. This analysis will assist in mapping out the policy landscape and identifying the primary drivers of policy initiatives within the partnership.

The model assumes that political actors are able to consciously transform their beliefs into political products, based on an integrated and methodical political belief system. This framework for promoting coalitions favors convictions rather than traditional interests as the basis for forming alliances. It is accurate because beliefs are more 'inclusive', covering a wide

range, and are relatively simple to verify. Moreover, a coherent belief system ensures the cohesion of coalitions to act together (Ike, 2009).

The Africa-Europe Foundation, as a think tank, likely plays a critical role in forming coalitions around shared beliefs concerning EU-AU relations. This includes beliefs about economic cooperation, sustainable development, and mutual geopolitical interests.

This framework also involves examining how think tanks align with other actors to form advocacy coalitions based on shared beliefs and objectives. According to the ACF, actors who share a set of normative and causal beliefs tend to cluster into advocacy coalitions. These coalitions exert influence over policy by developing and implementing strategies that align with their core beliefs (Sabatier, 1988). Understanding the dynamics within and between these coalitions, including their strategies for cooperation and conflict, is essential for assessing how they influence policy decisions. This includes looking at how coalitions mobilize resources, engage in policy debates, and influence policy framing and implementation.

Moreover, ACF suggests that policy change can occur through learning processes that take place when coalitions adjust their strategies in response to new information or changing conditions, thereby influencing policy outcomes (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014). External events can disrupt the equilibrium within a policy subsystem, giving rise to opportunities for coalitions to push for changes that align with their advocacy goals (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

- **H1:** The Foundation's ability to form broad coalitions across the EU and AU is based on shared belief systems centered around a willingness to impact policy changes in favor of economic and sustainable development goals.
- **H2:** Policy-oriented learning within and between coalitions that include the Africa-Europe Foundation leads to significant policy shifts in the EU-AU partnership.
- **H3:** External socio-economic or political events generate a growing institutional willingness to integrate CSOs and coalitions in the EU-AU partnership decision-making process.

2.2.2. Role of Think Tanks as Knowledge Brokers and Policy Entrepreneurs

The ACF posits that policy subsystems are populated by actors from various organizations who share a set of normative and causal beliefs and who often band together to form advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1988; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014). These coalitions act over time within

certain constraints and opportunities to influence policy processes. In the context of interregional partnerships, think tanks can be seen as crucial actors within these coalitions, as they play a pivotal role by acting as both knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs. This dual functionality enables them to bridge the gap between academic research and practical policy application, and to actively advocate for policy changes. Integrating the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) helps explain how think tanks influence policy through coalition dynamics and belief systems.

Think tanks often play dual roles in policy environments: as knowledge brokers who bring crucial information and analysis to the policy process by acting as mediators between policy-makers and academia, who modify the jargon and translate it into a language comprehensive to the policy-makers, and as policy entrepreneurs who actively push for specific policy changes and a particular agenda through the aid of policy-makers. This research will explore how think tanks in the EU-AU context utilize their expertise to influence policy discussions and how they leverage opportunities to steer policy in favourable directions. This involves analyzing the strategies think tanks use to insert their ideas into the policy process, including lobbying, public campaigns, and strategic alliances with other influential actors.

The effectiveness of think tanks as knowledge brokers positively correlates with the quality and relevance of policy decisions. The more effectively a think tank communicates and contextualizes research findings, the more likely these findings are to be incorporated into policy frameworks (Craft & Howlett, 2013). Think tanks that maintain robust networks with academia and industry are more effective in their role as knowledge brokers, thereby having a greater impact on policy formulation. These networks provide a richer pool of knowledge and perspectives, enhancing the think tank's ability to serve as a comprehensive resource (Weible et al., 2009).

Resource-rich think tanks are better positioned to advocate for and sustain policy initiatives (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). This role is particularly significant in the dynamic and complex landscape of international partnerships like the EU-AU relationship.

- **H4:** The Africa-Europe Foundation, as a coalition amplifying CSOs' voices, significantly influences the EU-AU partnership's policy decisions by playing a dual role of knowledge broker, and of policy entrepreneur.



- **H5:** Strategic framing of issues by the Africa-Europe Foundation leads to higher adoption rates of their advocated policies within the EU-AU partnership.



3. Research design

This research design guides the selection of methods for empirical investigation. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and content analysis of policy documents, will be employed to explore the hypotheses. Interviews will help uncover the perceptions and strategies of the Africa-Europe Foundation and other key actors, while document analysis will provide insights into the actual influence on policy texts and decisions.

The ACF requires an examination of the resources (such as financial, human, and informational) that CSOs mobilize to influence the policy process. This includes assessing how they manage to maintain influence despite potential resource constraints and how they navigate the institutional landscapes of the EU and AU to achieve their objectives.

Finally, the design guides the assessment of the impact of coalitions on the decision-making process within the EU-AU partnership. This involves analyzing specific instances where the positions of CSOs and their coalitions have been reflected in the policy outcomes. It also includes evaluating the extent to which these outcomes align with the initial goals of the coalitions, thereby assessing the effectiveness of think tank strategies in shaping policy.

By integrating the ACF with the roles of think tanks as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs, this framework offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the dynamics and impacts of CSOs activities within the complex EU-AU partnership. This dual approach not only highlights the interaction between political and scientific venues but also sheds light on the roles CSOs play in shaping interregional policies.

3.1. Research conception and methodology

For this study, the choice was made to adopt an interpretive qualitative research approach. In order to gain insight into the influence of civil society organizations (CSOs) at the EU-AU partnership level, a single case study on the Africa-Europe Foundation (AEF) is conducted. This approach enables an understanding of the various perceptions of the CSOs involved in the strategy groups of the AEF.

Therefore, this research relies on the capacity of single case studies to conduct in-depth explorations of the complex dynamics underlying and surrounding the relationships between

CSOs and the decision-making processes of the partnership between the EU and the AU. Indeed, to comprehend and analyze the link between knowledge production and policy promotion of the Africa-Europe Foundation and its influence on interregional decision-making processes, it is necessary to have an overview of the perceptions of diverse stakeholders involved in the partnership.

3.2. Case study Selection: Africa-Europe Foundation

In 2020, the Africa-Europe Foundation was established by the think tank Friends of Europe and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, in partnership with ONE and the South Africa Climate Foundation (AEF, 2023). This platform enables actors from both continents to exchange ideas, best practices, and formulate recommendations on the major challenges affecting Africa and Europe (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.). The objective of the Africa-Europe Foundation is to facilitate dialogue among different stakeholders, catalyze partnerships, and open new perspectives capable of transforming relations between Africa and Europe into concrete actions (Epic, 2023).

Within the Foundation, strategy groups are formed in the areas of health, agriculture and sustainable food systems, sustainable energy, climate adaptation, carbon markets, ocean governance, illicit financial flows, and women's leadership. These strategic groups play "a role as think tanks and advisory bodies for all those committed to taking Africa-Europe relations to the next level" (Africa-EU Partnership, n.d.). They bring together expertise and skills from academia, think tanks, civil society, and the public and private sectors.

Strategic groups and dialogue platforms are unique venues for working beyond organizational boundaries and addressing the complex, sometimes controversial issues at the heart of a strengthened Africa-Europe partnership. Strategic groups gather leaders and specialists from diverse backgrounds (civil society, business, politics) and focus on priority cooperation sectors for the Africa-Europe partnership (AEF, 2023).

The Africa-Europe Foundation represents a pivotal case study for examining the dynamics of interregional partnerships and the role of civil society organizations in shaping policy through the Advocacy Coalition Framework. The selection of AEF as a case study is based on several criteria that make it a particularly relevant actor for studying the collaboration between the European Union and the African Union.



The AEF is specifically designed to address and facilitate discussions on issues pertinent to Africa-Europe relations. Its focus on fostering dialogue and developing actionable strategies directly impacts the dynamics of the EU-AU partnership. This makes AEF an ideal case for studying how strategic interventions can influence policy and cooperation between two major international actors.

The foundation is recognized and legitimized by the EU and the AU themselves which underscores its influence and the importance of its role in the interregional dialogue. This endorsement enhances the foundation's capacity to act as a credible intermediary, bringing together diverse stakeholders from both continents.

AEF's structure, which includes a coalition of various CSOs, provides a rich context for applying the ACF. The coalition allows for an analysis of how shared beliefs and policy goals can lead to concerted action among diverse groups. This aspect is crucial for testing the ACF's applicability in a real-world setting where multiple actors collaborate to influence policy outcomes.

Despite its recent establishment in 2020, AEF has quickly become a key player in Africa-Europe relations. The foundation has been involved in significant events such as the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022, providing concrete instances and milestones for retrospective analysis. These events allow for an examination of how the foundation has influenced policy discussions and decisions at high-level meetings, offering insights into its effectiveness and impact over a relatively short period of time.

3.3. Data collection method

The method for collecting qualitative data consisted first of analysis and comparison of official statements from the 5th EU-AU Summit in 2017 with those from the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022, as well as the Commission-to-Commission statement from the same year and position papers from the Africa-Europe Foundation between 2016 and 2024. These document analyses helped to trace the influence of the AEF's advocacy and its alignment with the partnership's policy outcomes. An examination of specific instances where the Foundation has been instrumental in shaping policy decisions illustrates the Advocacy Coalition Framework in action within the EU-AU context. The selected time period from 2016 to the present allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the EU-AU partnership's evolution and the Africa-Europe



Foundation's impact since its establishment in 2020. By examining documents from four years before and after the Foundation's creation, the research could identify shifts in priorities, discourse, and policy outcomes that may be attributed to the Foundation's advocacy efforts. This timeframe provides a sufficient scope to observe the Foundation's influence while focusing on the most recent developments in the partnership.

To supplement the data obtained from the documents, we conducted semi-structured interviews (through discussions and questionnaires) with key CSOs' stakeholders involved in the EU-AU partnership: members of the CSOs involved as members of the Africa-Europe Foundation. These interviews were used to assess the Foundation's roles as both a knowledge broker and a policy entrepreneur as well as a coalition bringing together the various CSOs involved in issues related to the EU-AU partnership to form a unified advocacy force. The questionnaires were designed to introduce the Advocacy coalition framework to data collection through the identification of key code-names: 'belief systems', 'policy learning', 'influence and challenges', 'coalition groups', and 'improving inclusion'. The collection of qualitative data through interviews was carried out with a questionnaire and discussions dedicated to 7 members of CSOs involved in the strategic groups of the AEF. The insights gained from these interviews were enhanced by the diverse roles and extensive experiences of the participants in their respective fields. To address the five pre-established hypotheses, the interview questions were organized according to specific variables. Additionally, all interviews were conducted via videoconference, with participants who volunteered and provided informed consent after being briefed on the research's objectives and how the data would be used. The data were anonymized, and participants' confidentiality was strictly upheld.

Regarding belief systems, CSO members were asked about the core values and policy positions that guide their organization's work on EU-AU relations. They also reflected on how these values and positions have evolved over time based on their experiences engaging with the partnership. Additionally, they were inquired about how they decide their research priorities and advocacy agenda, and what factors influence their decision to focus on specific issues within the EU-AU partnership.

Understanding how think tanks decide their research priorities helps assess their role as knowledge brokers. It reveals the alignment of their research with the needs of the EU-AU partnership and how effectively they can influence policy through informed research.



In terms of policy learning, CSO members were questioned about whether they primarily engage in proactive policy formulation or reactive policy analysis. They were asked how the timing of their intervention impacts the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. Furthermore, they provided insights on how their organization generates and disseminates knowledge about the EU-AU partnership and how they use this knowledge to refine their advocacy strategies and influence policy over time. The interviews also inquired about how their past experiences engaging with the EU-AU partnership have informed their current strategies and approaches. Specific examples of lessons learned from previous interactions that have shaped their advocacy efforts were requested, along with whether these lessons have prompted significant changes in their organization's norms, policies, or objectives, or if they have primarily led to minor adjustments in strategies and tactics.

These questions help to determine the proactive versus reactive nature of think tanks in the policy process. It directly relates to their effectiveness as policy entrepreneurs and their ability to influence policy at strategic points.

Regarding influence and challenges, CSO members were asked about the key factors that determine a CSO's influence and credibility. They also discussed about the main challenges facing CSOs today, such as competition and funding. Additionally, they were inquired about how they measure their performance and influence toward European and African institutions, and what the impact of the evolution of the EU-AU partnership on their activities has been.

Identifying factors that determine a think tank's influence and credibility helps in evaluating the hypothesis regarding the correlation between the effectiveness of think tanks as knowledge brokers and the quality of policy decisions. This directly relates to assessing the impact of their advocacy and research outputs on policy decisions. Understanding the challenges think tanks face provides insights into external and internal factors that might affect their ability to function effectively as both knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs. How think tanks measure their influence on European and African institutions is key to evaluating their effectiveness as knowledge brokers and validating the hypothesis related to their impact on policy-making. The question of assessing how changes in the EU-AU partnership affect think tanks is crucial for understanding the dynamic nature of their role and their adaptability to shifting political landscapes.

In the context of coalition groups, CSO members discussed the benefits of having links with other CSOs in Europe and Africa, and how these connections have facilitated knowledge



sharing, capacity building, or joint advocacy efforts. They also reflected on whether they believe that the AEF as a coalition is a tool to raise the voices of different CSOs. Furthermore, they were questioned about the risks or challenges their organization faces in engaging with the AEF, and how they manage potential conflicts of interest or competition for resources and influence among coalition members. They were also asked about the resources (time, staff, financial) their organization invests in maintaining and leveraging relationships within the AEF network, and whether they feel a difference (augmentation or reduction) in their performance and influence since the creation of the Africa-Europe Foundation.

Exploring the benefits of networking with other think tanks across Europe and Africa can highlight the collaborative strength of think tanks and their ability to form coalitions, which is a key aspect of the Advocacy Coalition Framework. The question seeking to assess the direct impact of the Africa-Europe Foundation's establishment on the operational capacity and influence of think tanks provides empirical data to support or refute the effectiveness of such coalitions. By asking whether AEF effectively raises the voices of various CSOs, it explores the foundation's role as a platform for advocacy and whether it enhances the policy influence of its members, aligning with the ACF's emphasis on coalition-driven advocacy.

Finally, regarding improving inclusion, CSO members were asked what they would change or what they want to improve in the way that European and African institutions involve CSOs, particularly the Afrique-Europe Foundation, in the decision-making processes.

This question is critical for understanding the gaps between current practices and the ideal state of CSO involvement in decision-making processes. Responses will provide qualitative data on how to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of the EU-AU partnership frameworks.

Therefore, this research employed a double triangulation method, integrating data from multiple informants with varying expertise and viewpoints through interviews, alongside secondary sources. Utilizing data triangulation helps mitigate potential biases that could arise from relying on a single data source (Yin, 2018). This triangulation of data sources provides a more comprehensive understanding of how CSOs' beliefs, strategies, and challenges align with or diverge from the official narratives and policy directions of the EU-AU partnership. By integrating the insights from both the interviews and document analysis, the research can offer a nuanced assessment of the influence and effectiveness of CSOs in shaping the EU-AU partnership through their engagement with the Africa-Europe Foundation.

3.4. Data analysis method

This study utilized a thematic approach, informed by Yin's (2018) concept of pattern matching. An abductive inference methodology was employed to interpret the findings, allowing for a continuous interaction between empirical data and theoretical frameworks. This iterative process facilitated the refinement of hypotheses and provided a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The pattern-matching technique was instrumental in comparing key trends from empirical observations with theoretical models, which is particularly valuable for theory development in qualitative research (ibid.). This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and potential causal relationships while remaining open to new insights from the data. Furthermore, this approach improves the transparency and clarity of the research process and results by making explicit the mental models and underlying assumptions (ibid.). A flexible pattern-matching model was specifically utilized, allowing for adjustments based on the data, which is particularly beneficial in research areas with less developed theoretical foundations (ibid.).

As the first step of the analysis, official statements and position papers were analyzed to trace the advocacy efforts of the Africa-Europe Foundation and its alignment with the partnership's policy outcomes. Content analysis focused on identifying references to think tanks and CSOs, policy recommendations made by these entities, and any acknowledgment of their contributions in official documents. The analysis also considered the context in which these documents were produced, including the geopolitical landscape, key events in EU-AU relations, and shifts in policy priorities. This contextual analysis helped in understanding the impact of think tanks and CSOs within the broader framework of EU-AU cooperation.

In the second step, responses from the questionnaires were transcribed and subjected to qualitative coding to identify recurring themes patterns, and insights. This involved an iterative process where responses are categorized into major and minor themes related to the influence of think tanks and CSOs, their challenges, and their roles as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs. This approach complemented the thematic analysis by providing measurable data on the prevalence of certain views and experiences among the respondents.

Then, the analysis compared responses across different members of CSOs involved in the Africa-Europe Foundation. This comparison aimed to identify convergences and divergences



in perspectives regarding the influence and challenges of think tanks and CSOs in the policy-making process.

In order to interpret the results, the findings from the document analysis were synthesized with insights from the qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive picture of the role and impact of think tanks and CSOs in shaping EU-AU policies. This synthesis addressed the research questions by linking the theoretical framework with empirical evidence.

The data analysis was closely integrated with the Advocacy Coalition Framework and the dual roles of think tanks as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs. The analysis specifically looked for evidence supporting or refuting the hypotheses related to the effectiveness of think tanks and CSOs in influencing policy outcomes and the challenges they encounter in this endeavor.

The analysis was expected to yield insights into the mechanisms through which think tanks and CSOs influence policy-making within the EU-AU partnership. Specifically, it examines how the belief systems of these organizations, including their core values, policy positions, and strategic priorities, shape their advocacy efforts and ultimately impact policy decisions.

By analyzing the relationship between the independent variable of belief systems and the dependent variable of specific policy outcomes, this research aimed to uncover how the Africa-Europe Foundation and other CSOs translated their beliefs into actionable policy changes. This involved tracing the process from the articulation of policy positions to the formation of advocacy coalitions, the framing of policy issues, and the strategic engagement with decision-makers. The analysis also sheds light on the challenges think tanks and CSOs face in their advocacy efforts, such as resource constraints, political resistance, and competing interests within the partnership. By examining how these organizations navigate and overcome these challenges, the research identified effective strategies for enhancing their influence and impact. Ultimately, these findings would contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of civil society inclusion in interregional partnerships. By illuminating the link between belief systems and policy outcomes, and by highlighting best practices and lessons learned, this research offers valuable recommendations for strengthening the role of think tanks and CSOs in shaping the EU-AU partnership and advancing sustainable development on both continents.

4. Empirical findings & analysis

4.1. Evolution of the EU-AU Partnership: From the 5th to the 6th Summit

The Africa-Europe Foundation appeared to be a key player in EU-AU relations. The Foundation was involved in significant events such as the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022, providing concrete examples and milestones for retrospective analysis. These events allow for an examination of how the Foundation has influenced discussions and policy decisions at high-level meetings, thus offering insights into its effectiveness and impact.

In this section, the aim is to study and compare the statements from the 5th EU-AU Summit in 2017 with those from the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022, as well as the Commission-to-Commission statement from the same year. The objective is to observe potential correlations between the evolution of the EU-AU partnership and the priorities and demands of civil society organizations, particularly the Africa-Europe Foundation.

These statements outline strategic priorities, policy recommendations, and the positions of various stakeholders on issues related to EU-AU relations. Analyzing these documents allows for an evaluation of the extent to which the Foundation's recommendations align with or influence official policy directions.

4.1.1. Key Outcomes of the 5th AU-EU Summit (2017)

The 5th African Union-European Union Summit was held on November 29-30, 2017, in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. This summit brought together 83 European and African leaders, including heads of state and government, as well as representatives from various international organizations such as Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the UN, and Alpha Condé, the President of the African Union (Présidence de la République de Côte-d'Ivoire, 2017). The main theme of the summit was "Investing in Youth for a Sustainable Future." Discussions primarily focused on four areas of common interest: economic prospects for youth, peace and security, mobility and migration, and cooperation on governance (Carrier, 2017).

The summit was marked by strong commitments to strengthen the AU-EU partnership, and the leaders agreed on the necessity of rigorous follow-up to ensure that the initiatives undertaken yield tangible benefits for the youth of both continents (EEAS, 2018).

At the conclusion of the summit, a joint declaration was adopted, setting the priorities for the EU-Africa partnership. Notably, it included commitments towards youth and employment, emphasizing the importance of “creating quality jobs for young people and promoting economic transformation and sustainable development” (AU-EU, 2017). Additionally, the declaration highlighted the need for “renewed and strengthened cooperation for peace and security”, focusing on African solutions to African problems.

Regarding the role of civil society in shaping the AU-EU partnership, the declaration recognized the contributions of civil society, youth, and local authorities in the development of the partnership and underscored “the necessity of inclusive and accountable governance” (AU-EU, 2017). This acknowledgment of the role of civil society in governance and the emphasis on the participation of all can be seen as a testament to the influence of CSOs in defining the partnership's priorities and ensuring effective implementation.

Furthermore, the areas of intervention mentioned, such as “education, skills development, and economic transformation”, align with the strategic groups and priorities of the Africa-Europe Foundation (AEF, 2023). The declaration's emphasis on civil society involvement and inclusive governance could be related to the role of the Africa-Europe Foundation in amplifying civil society voices and advocating for their inclusion in decision-making processes.

Therefore, the recognition of the role of civil society in governance and the focus on participation indicate that CSOs contribute to more responsible and transparent decision-making processes within the EU-AU partnership.

4.1.2. Key Outcomes of the 6th AU-EU Summit (2022)

The 6th African Union-European Union Summit was held on February 17-18, 2022, in Brussels, Belgium, bringing together many key leaders of the partnership, such as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and African Union Commission President Moussa Faki Mahamat (Euronews, 2022). The main theme of the summit was "A Joint Vision for 2030," aiming to renew and deepen the partnership between the two continents, focusing on crucial issues such as health, security, climate change, migration, and sustainable economic development (African Union, n.d.).

Notably, the summit focused on several critical issues, including ways to overcome the health, economic, and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, energy transition and

combating climate change, tools and solutions to promote stability and security, strengthening trade relations and supporting agriculture, and finally, managing migration flows and mobility (Conseil de l'UE, 2022).

At the conclusion of the summit, a joint final declaration, "A Common Vision for 2030," was adopted, presenting a renewed vision for the EU-AU partnership for 2030. The main pillars are solidarity, sustainable economic cooperation, peace and security, and overall prosperity for the citizens of both continents. Among the key commitments of this declaration is the European pledge "to provide at least 450 million vaccine doses to Africa" and to "mobilize 425 million euros" to accelerate vaccination efforts (Conseil de l'UE, 2022). Additionally, an Africa-Europe investment program of at least 150 billion euros aims to support diversified, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient economies. A monitoring committee was also established to ensure the implementation of the promises made during the summit (Châtelot, 2022).

Regarding the role of civil society in shaping the EU-AU partnership, the declaration recognizes the importance of civil society involvement and mentions "the contributions of youth, civil society, local authorities, diasporas, and the private sector", particularly through platforms such as "the Africa-Europe Week and the EU-Africa Business Forum" (Conseil de l'UE, 2022).

The inclusion of civil society in the partnership's vision and the emphasis on dialogue and engagement platforms underscore the role of CSOs in guiding political discussions and ensuring inclusive cooperation. The areas of intervention mentioned, such as health, digitalization, transport, agriculture, and energy, align with the strategic groups of the Africa-Europe Foundation, an emphasis that could be attributed to the Foundation's advocacy efforts in these areas. Notably, the declaration mentions the launch of specific programs/initiatives that seem to reflect the recommendations of the Africa-Europe Foundation, such as the 750 million euro program for infrastructure investments in transport, digitalization, and energy connectivity in Africa, aligning with the Foundation's strategic groups. It also notes the creation of joint working groups (e.g., on fertilizers) and high-level dialogues (e.g., on economic integration), which could be instances where the Foundation's advocacy influenced the decision to establish these mechanisms.

4.1.3. Comparative Analysis of the 5th and 6th Summits



The 5th AU-EU Summit focused on immediate priorities such as youth employment, economic transformation, and peace and security. By the 6th Summit, the partnership had evolved to include broader and more integrated objectives such as health sovereignty, climate action, and digital transformation, reflecting a more holistic approach to sustainable development.

The commitment to provide vaccines and the substantial investments pledged in 2022 indicate a shift towards addressing global health challenges and economic resilience, demonstrating the partnership's adaptability to new global challenges. Notably, the emphasis during the 6th Summit on the Africa-Europe investment package and specific infrastructure projects (e.g., digitalization, energy, transport) signifies a more detailed and actionable approach to economic cooperation compared to the broader commitments of 2017.

Regarding the role of civil society, both documents underscore its importance, but the 2022 declaration places greater emphasis on structured engagement platforms, such as the Africa-Europe Week and the EU-Africa Business Forum. This suggests an evolution towards a more formal and systematic inclusion of civil society in the partnership.

4.1.4. Influence of the Africa-Europe Foundation

The strategic groups of the Africa-Europe Foundation focus on health, digitalization, transport, agriculture, and energy, which closely align with the priority areas highlighted in the 2022 declaration. This suggests that the Foundation's advocacy and recommendations are in sync with the partnership agenda to influence it.

Following the 6th Summit, the Africa-Europe Foundation commended its role in implementing a renewed partnership, with its leaders actively participating. Notably, AEF co-founder Mo Ibrahim (Chairman and Founder of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation) and the co-chairs of the AEF's strategic groups, Louise Mushikiwabo (Secretary-General of the OIF) and Chrysoula Zacharopoulou (Member of the European Parliament and co-chair of the COVAX Shareholders Council), joined the summit debates.

The work of the Africa-Europe Foundation was acknowledged by both African Union and European Union leaders. During his speech at the summit's opening ceremony, European Council President Charles Michel stated that "Mo Ibrahim [cofounder of the AEF], and the young Africa-Europe Foundation, have quickly become a powerful catalyst for new ideas and



promising projects. The success of collective projects is about much more than institutional relations. It depends on the strength of personal ties. Europe and Africa, we are a network of women and men inspired by the power of a common project” (Michel, 2022). African Union President H.E. Macky Sall also praised the AEF’s commitment.

In terms of facilitating dialogue and knowledge exchange, the Foundation's emphasis on amplifying civil society voices and creating dialogue platforms is reflected in the 6th Summit’s recognition of structured engagement platforms such as Africa-Europe Week, which provide CSOs with the opportunity to engage directly with policymakers and contribute to policy discussions. This engagement helps ensure that civil society perspectives and expertise are integrated into decision-making processes within the partnership.

Additionally, the AEF and other CSOs seem to have played a significant role in shaping the EU-AU partnership’s political agenda. For instance, the “9 months after the summit” report highlights the alignment of AEF’s intervention areas, such as health, digitalization, transport, agriculture, and energy, with the priority sectors identified in the EU-AU Summit commitments. This may suggest that the AEF’s advocacy efforts influenced the prioritization of these sectors in the partnership’s policy framework.

The Foundation’s briefing notes and reports on key sectors likely contributed to the commitments and initiatives detailed in the 2022 declaration. For example, the emphasis on health sovereignty and vaccine production aligns with the Foundation’s advocacy for strengthening Africa’s health systems and production capacities. The Foundation’s role in facilitating discussions on emerging issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change likely influenced the partnership’s adaptability and responsiveness to global challenges, as evidenced by the comprehensive approach to health and climate action in the 2022 declaration.

Moreover, the Africa-Europe partnership has always faced the challenge of realizing its significant potential, with limited mechanisms in place to track how high-level summit commitments translate into tangible changes. Monitoring the implementation of these commitments is essential to maintaining the trust of citizens on both continents. Through its Charter, the AEF has emphasized the importance of tracking the effective implementation of political commitments. Following the 6th AU-EU Summit, the AEF welcomed efforts to

complement existing mechanisms to monitor summit commitments and ensure tangible results advance the partnership, in close collaboration with relevant institutions and other stakeholders.

Therefore, comparing the conclusions of the 5th AU-EU Summit (2017) and the 6th AU-EU Summit (2022) reveals a significant evolution of the EU-AU partnership towards a more integrated and holistic approach to sustainable development. The advocacy and recommendations of the Africa-Europe Foundation appear aligned with the partnership's priorities in strategic areas and promote the inclusion of civil society in decision-making processes. This suggests the influence of CSOs and the Foundation in strengthening cooperation and ensuring the partnership effectively addresses immediate and long-term challenges.

4.2. Role of the Africa-Europe Foundation as an Advocacy Coalition

The qualitative interviews and questionnaires conducted with CSO members involved in the strategic groups of the AEF provide valuable insights into their roles, challenges, and influence within the EU-AU partnership. The findings are organized thematically, according to the key code names of the Advocacy Coalition Framework: belief systems, policy learning, influence and challenges, coalition groups, and improving inclusion.

The ACF provides a useful framework for analyzing the influence of CSOs and think tanks, such as the Africa-Europe Foundation, on the EU-AU partnership. The analysis of qualitative interviews and documents provides valuable insights into the dynamics of CSO engagement within the EU-AU partnership, particularly the role of the Africa-Europe Foundation in shaping policy discussions and decisions. Observations on the evolution of the EU-AU partnership between the 5th and 6th summits demonstrate how the Africa-Europe Foundation's recommendations have contributed to shaping this evolution. By applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as a theoretical framework, these results help understand the role of the Foundation as an advocacy coalition and catalyst for civil society initiatives in the decision-making processes of the intercontinental partnership.

4.2.1. Shared Beliefs and Values: the foundations for advocacy coalitions

The interviews reveal a set of common values and policy positions guiding the work of CSOs on EU-AU relations. These shared beliefs are centered around a human-centric approach to environmental protection and the promotion of greater equity for African countries on the

international scene. These values have remained relatively stable over time, with CSOs' missions serving as a consistent guide for their advocacy and research priorities.

Factors influencing CSOs' decision to focus on specific issues within the EU-AU partnership include alignment with their organizational mission, the urgency of the issue, and the potential for impact (Interviews 1, 3 & 5). For example, the African Climate Foundation (ACF) has prioritized the climate-development nexus, recognizing the critical importance of this agenda for Africa's future (Interview 5).

Moreover, the interviews revealed that the organizations' policy positions have evolved over time, influenced by their experiences engaging with the partnership and the changing global context. The evolution of belief systems is also evident in the comparison of the 5th AU-EU Summit declaration (2017) and the 6th AU-EU Summit declaration (2022). The conclusions of the 2017 EU-AU summit emphasized immediate priorities such as youth employment, economic transformation, and peace and security, reflecting a belief system focused on addressing urgent socio-economic challenges. The "common vision for 2030" adopted in 2022 expanded these priorities to include broader and more integrated objectives such as health sovereignty, climate action, and digital transformation, indicating an evolution of the belief system towards a more holistic approach to sustainable development. The evolution of belief systems from 2017 to 2022 aligns with the Africa-Europe Foundation's advocacy for a comprehensive approach to development that includes health, digitalization, and environmental sustainability.

Therefore, on the basis of the data collected, the evolution of belief systems suggests that the Foundation's recommendations have influenced the partnership's priorities, reflecting a convergence of belief systems between the Foundation and the EU-AU partnership. Hypothesis 1 seems to be validated, as the Foundation's ability to form broad coalitions across the EU and AU is based on shared belief systems centered around a willingness to impact policy changes in favor of economic and sustainable development goals.

4.2.2. Policy Learning and Partnership Shifts

According to the stakeholders interviewed, CSOs primarily engage in reactive policy analysis rather than proactive policy formulation. Many believe there are already enough policies and that adding new ones often just increases complexity. However, they acknowledge

that new topics or sectors may require new policies, in which case they look to adapt existing ones. Moreover, limited coordination among African civil society and governments tends to hinder proactive engagement, leading to more reactive responses to EU-driven agendas (Interview 5).

Members of CSOs interviewed generate and disseminate knowledge about the EU-AU partnership through their roles as experts, sharing their views through expert meetings, online platforms, and direct engagement with policymakers. CSOs use this knowledge cautiously to refine their advocacy strategies and influence policy over time, often focusing on reframing narratives around key issues (Interview 4). Past experiences engaging with the EU-AU partnership have made the importance of certain issues clearer and revealed capacity gaps that CSOs are working to address in the long term to enable more proactive responses.

Moreover, the document analysis revealed that the integration of lessons from past experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity to build resilient health systems during the 2022 summit, demonstrates double-loop learning, wherein the partnership has reassessed and adjusted its fundamental strategies and objectives. The Africa-Europe Foundation's role in facilitating discussions on emerging issues and promoting inclusive participation has likely contributed to this policy learning process.

Therefore, on the basis of the data collected, hypothesis 2 that policy-oriented learning within and between coalitions leads to policy shifts in the EU-AU partnership seems to be validated. Indeed, the change in addressing policy learning within the EU-AU partnership aligns with the Foundation's advocacy for a comprehensive partnership addressing both short-term and long-term challenges. However, while the various stakeholders may benefit from the sharing of knowledge, the correlation between the political orientation of the CSOs coalition within the AEF and the redefinition of the partnership's priorities cannot be established with certainty. Given the data collected, it seems undeniable that there is a link between policy learning between CSOs within a coalition and the improvement of their active role. Greater proactivity on the part of CSOs in their agendas would ensure correlation with their impacts.

4.2.3. Challenges and Influence: CSOs in the EU-AU Context

According to the interview analysis, key factors determining CSOs' influence and credibility include leadership, evidence-based work, and the ability to maintain independence



while engaging with policymakers. The main challenges faced by CSOs today include funding sustainability, coordinating effectively, and navigating complex political landscapes where CSO positions may be perceived as aligned with foreign interests (Interview 5).

Measuring performance and influence towards European and African institutions remains a challenge, but indicators such as invitations to speak at high-level forums and partnerships on key initiatives suggest growing recognition of CSOs' expertise.

The interviews and questionnaires provide evidence of the influence of CSOs within the EU-AU partnership. The detailed commitments and initiatives in the 2022 declaration, such as the Africa-Europe investment package and specific infrastructure projects, reflect a more concrete approach to economic cooperation compared to the broader commitments of 2017.

The influence of the Africa-Europe Foundation is also evident in the alignment between its strategic intervention areas and the priority sectors highlighted in the 2022 summit declaration. However, challenges remain in translating this alignment into concrete actions. The broader commitments of 2017 towards economic cooperation contrast with the more detailed initiatives of 2022, suggesting that the Foundation's recommendations have gradually gained traction, but their implementation remains a challenge. Indeed, challenges such as differing capacities and priorities between the EU and AU, as highlighted in the literature, continue to impact the implementation of common frameworks (Miyandazi et al., 2018).

As the evolution of the EU-AU partnership has led to ambitious declarations, the hypothesis 3 seems to be validated. Indeed, external socioeconomic or political events seem to generate a growing institutional willingness to integrate CSOs and coalitions in the EU-AU partnership decision-making process. However, limited resources and capacity constraints of CSOs can hinder their ability to fully engage with and influence the partnership's agenda. CSOs hope it will bring conversations to pressing, real issues at high political decision-making levels.

4.2.4. Coalition Benefits: Knowledge Brokering and Policy Entrepreneurship

The benefits of having links with other think tanks in Europe and Africa include knowledge sharing, joint advocacy efforts, capacity building, and finding partners for calls for proposals (interviews). The AEF is definitely seen as a valuable platform for amplifying CSO voices and facilitating dialogue among diverse stakeholders.

However, challenges exist in managing potential conflicts of interest and competition for resources and influence among coalition members (Interview 4). Effective coalition-building requires significant investments of time and resources, which can strain CSOs' already limited capacities (Interviews 3, 4 & 5).

The impact of the AEF on CSOs' influence and performance is still evolving, with many organizations recognizing its potential but acknowledging that more work is needed to fully leverage the platform (Interview 5).

The Africa-Europe Foundation's efforts to create dialogue and engagement platforms have likely contributed to the formalization of coalition groups within the partnership. This structured approach to coalition-building aligns with the ACF's emphasis on the role of coalitions in influencing policy outcomes. Coalitions generate and disseminate information about the EU-AU partnership by acting as specialists, expressing their insights in expert meetings, through online platforms, and by directly interacting with policymakers.

The evolution of the partnership reflects an increasing emphasis on inclusive participation. While both declarations recognize the importance of civil society, the 6th summit's conclusions place greater emphasis on structured stakeholder engagement platforms such as Africa-Europe Week. This aligns with the Africa-Europe Foundation's efforts to amplify civil society voices and create dialogue spaces, indicating its influence in shaping the partnership's approach to coalition-building. Therefore, hypothesis 4, that the AEF as a coalition amplifying CSO' voices, significantly influences the EU-AU partnership's policy decisions by acting as a knowledge broker, aligning academic research with policy needs and leading to more informed policy decisions, and a policy entrepreneur successfully influencing the policy agenda and outcomes of the EU-AU partnership, seems to be validated.

However, despite these successes, these elements extracted from the data collection also highlight the challenges CSOs face in influencing decision-making processes. These challenges underscore the need for stronger mechanisms to ensure that CSO contributions are not only heard but also implemented. Notably, the inclusion of CSOs in the implementation and monitoring of policies can enhance the accountability and transparency of the partnership. The conclusions of the 5th EU-AU summit particularly emphasized the need for joint mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the implementation of summit commitments. CSOs can play a crucial

role in these processes by providing independent assessments and holding policymakers accountable for their commitments.

4.2.5. Enhancing CSO Inclusion: Insights and Recommendations

To improve CSO inclusion in EU-AU decision-making, interviewees suggested Africa should set its own priorities rather than Europe, along with more financial and media support. Feedback on how CSO work has concretely changed EU/AU institutions would also be appreciated. More advanced consultations with civil society, especially think tanks, before summits are needed, with support for African civil society to coordinate amongst themselves first. Helping civil society coordinate could lead to more coordinated positions from African governments as well.

CSOs identify several areas for improvement in how European and African institutions involve them in decision-making processes. These include:

1. Ensuring that both European and African policymakers engage with CSOs early in the policy development process, rather than merely reacting to predetermined agendas (Interview 4).
2. Providing financial and technical support to enable African CSOs to effectively coordinate among themselves and with their governments, enhancing their ability to proactively shape the partnership's priorities (Interview 4).
3. Establishing clear feedback mechanisms to inform CSOs how their inputs have influenced policy decisions and to facilitate continuous learning and adaptation (Interview 3).
4. Expanding beyond high-level political dialogues to foster more inclusive and sustained engagement with a broader range of CSOs, including those representing youth, women, and marginalized communities (Interview 5).

These findings highlight the complex dynamics and challenges faced by CSOs in influencing the EU-AU partnership through their involvement in the AEF. The insights gained from the interviews and questionnaires provide a foundation for understanding the role of CSOs as knowledge brokers, policy entrepreneurs, and advocates within the context of the ACF. The findings also underscore the importance of coalition-building and inclusive participation in shaping the EU-AU partnership.



It offers a nuanced picture of CSOs' roles and influence within the EU-AU partnership. While CSOs have made significant contributions in shaping the partnership's agenda and advocating for inclusive, sustainable development, they also face persistent challenges in terms of funding, capacity, and political constraints.

The AEF emerges as a promising platform for enhancing CSO collaboration and amplifying their voices, but its full potential remains to be realized. Improving the inclusion and impact of CSOs in the EU-AU partnership will require concerted efforts from both European and African institutions to create enabling environments for meaningful participation, provide targeted support to strengthen CSO capacities, and establish clear mechanisms for feedback and accountability. The document analysis also reveals an evolution towards more formalized and systematic inclusion of civil society in the partnership. The emphasis on structured engagement platforms such as Africa-Europe Week in the 2022 summit declaration indicates a recognition of the need for meaningful CSO participation.

As the EU-AU partnership continues to evolve in response to global challenges and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the insights and experiences of CSOs will remain crucial in ensuring that the partnership delivers tangible benefits for the people of both continents. By embracing the diversity of CSO perspectives and expertise, and by fostering genuine collaboration and mutual learning, the EU-AU partnership can chart a path towards a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable future.

Therefore, the strategic framing of issues by the Africa-Europe Foundation leads to higher adoption rates of their advocated policies within the EU-AU partnership, validating hypothesis 5. However, the findings also highlight the challenges in translating inclusive participation into concrete influence on decision-making processes. Respondents noted that while avenues for engagement exist, CSOs often struggle to effectively navigate complex institutional landscapes and overcome resource constraints.

In conclusion, the analysis of qualitative interviews and documents provides valuable insights into the dynamics of CSO engagement within the EU-AU partnership, particularly the role of the Africa-Europe Foundation in shaping policy discussions and decisions. By applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework as a theoretical lens, the findings illuminate the



Foundation's influence as an advocacy coalition and catalyst for civil society initiatives in the intercontinental partnership's decision-making processes.

The findings reveal that CSOs have a significant influence on decision-making processes within the EU-AU partnership.

Moreover, the Africa-Europe Foundation emerges as a significant advocacy coalition, facilitating collaboration among CSOs, amplifying civil society voices, and contributing to the evolution of the EU-AU partnership towards a more holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable development.

However, the analysis also highlights the challenges faced by CSOs in effectively navigating complex institutional landscapes, overcoming resource constraints, and translating inclusive participation into concrete influence on decision-making processes. Addressing these challenges and creating more structured and supportive engagement mechanisms will be crucial for enhancing the role of CSOs in shaping the future of the EU-AU partnership.

Overall, the analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving role of CSOs and the Africa-Europe Foundation in shaping policy within the EU-AU partnership. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive and participatory approaches to policy-making and the need for greater recognition and support for CSO engagement within interregional partnerships. By enhancing representation, building trust, leveraging local expertise, and strengthening policy implementation and monitoring, effective CSO inclusion can improve cooperation and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable EU-AU partnership.

4.3. Limitations and avenues for the Theoretical Framework

Overall, the findings confirm the expectations set by the ACF, demonstrating the influence of the Africa-Europe Foundation in shaping the EU-AU partnership and highlighting the importance of inclusive participation and coalition-building in achieving sustainable development goals.

While the Advocacy Coalition Framework provides a useful lens for analyzing the evolution of the EU-AU partnership and the influence of civil society organizations like the Africa-Europe Foundation, some limitations and avenues for further theoretical development emerge.



Firstly, the ACF's focus primarily on policy change driven by advocacy coalitions may not fully capture the complex power dynamics and historical legacies that shape EU-AU relations, such as the colonial past and ongoing economic asymmetries (Chabal, 2010; Taylor, 2016). Future research could explore how these structural factors interact with belief systems to influence policy change.

Moreover, the ACF emphasizes belief systems and policy learning, but the analysis of the declarations suggests that external events and crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) also play a significant role in shaping the partnership's priorities and adaptation. The Africa-Europe Foundation's role in facilitating dialogue and promoting inclusive participation has likely contributed to this learning process. However, the ACF's emphasis on policy-oriented learning within and between coalitions may not fully account for the impact of external shocks and the role of international organizations in facilitating policy transfer (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). Incorporating insights from policy transfer and lesson-drawing literature could enrich the understanding of policy learning in interregional partnerships.

On another hand, the ACF's emphasis on coalition-building and inclusion is relevant. However, it may not fully capture the diversity of interests and power relations within civil society (Mbaya, 2023). Future research could draw on insights from social movement theory and network analysis to better understand the dynamics of coalition-building and the challenges of ensuring representativeness and accountability in CSO participation (Diani & McAdam, 2003).

The analysis highlights the need for more structured and supportive engagement mechanisms to enhance the inclusion of CSOs in the EU-AU partnership's decision-making processes. While the ACF emphasizes the importance of inclusive participation, it could be further developed to provide more specific guidance on the design and implementation of participatory governance arrangements in interregional partnerships (Steffek & Hahn, 2010). Integrating insights from deliberative democracy theory and multi-stakeholder governance literature could strengthen the ACF's ability to inform strategies for improving inclusion (Bäckstrand, 2010).

Finally, the analysis reveals the Africa-Europe Foundation's influence in shaping the EU-AU partnership's agenda, particularly through the alignment of its strategic focus areas with the priorities outlined in the 2022 summit declaration. However, challenges persist in translating this alignment into concrete actions, highlighting the need for stronger implementation



mechanisms. The ACF's focus on coalition influence could be expanded to better account for the institutional constraints and capacity asymmetries that affect the implementation of joint policies in interregional partnerships (Miyandazi et al., 2018).

In conclusion, while the ACF provides a valuable framework for analyzing the role of CSOs in shaping the EU-AU partnership, the findings also reveal some limitations and potential avenues for theoretical refinement. Incorporating insights from complementary theoretical perspectives, such as policy transfer, social movement theory, and deliberative democracy, could enhance the ACF's explanatory power and practical relevance in the context of interregional partnerships. By addressing these limitations and exploring new theoretical synergies, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and challenges of civil society inclusion in the EU-AU partnership and beyond.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of the thesis

This thesis has examined the role of civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly the Africa-Europe Foundation, in shaping the EU-AU partnership and the "Joint Vision for 2030" adopted at the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022. The research aimed to assess how CSOs influence decision-making processes within the partnership and how their effective inclusion can improve cooperation between the two regions.

The study began by tracing the evolution of the EU-AU partnership, highlighting key milestones such as the adoption of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy in 2007 and the increasing involvement of non-state actors in the partnership. It then examined the outcomes of the 6th EU-AU Summit, which marked a turning point in the partnership by adopting a common vision for 2030 focused on strengthening economic cooperation and promoting sustainable development.

The theoretical framework employed the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to analyze the dynamics of CSO engagement within the EU-AU partnership. The ACF posits that actors within a policy subsystem form coalitions based on shared beliefs and work to translate these beliefs into policies. The study also drew on the concepts of knowledge brokering and policy entrepreneurship to understand how think tanks like the Africa-Europe Foundation influence policy through their dual roles as providers of expertise and advocates for change.

The research design involved a qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives and document analysis of position papers and official statements. The Africa-Europe Foundation was selected as a pivotal case study due to its specific focus on EU-AU relations and its recognition by both the EU and AU.

The findings revealed that CSOs involved in the Africa-Europe Foundation's strategic groups share common values centered around a human-centric approach to development, environmental protection, and the promotion of equity. These organizations primarily engage in reactive policy analysis rather than proactive policy formulation, generating and disseminating knowledge to refine their advocacy strategies over time.



Key factors determining CSOs' influence include leadership, evidence-based work, and the ability to maintain independence while engaging with policymakers. However, they face challenges such as funding sustainability, coordination, and navigating complex political landscapes. The Africa-Europe Foundation emerges as a valuable platform for amplifying CSO voices and facilitating dialogue, although challenges exist in managing potential conflicts of interest and competition for resources among coalition members.

The document analysis traced the evolution of the EU-AU partnership between the 5th and 6th summits, revealing a shift towards a more holistic approach to sustainable development aligned with the Africa-Europe Foundation's advocacy. The Foundation's strategic focus areas closely align with the priority sectors highlighted in the 2022 summit declaration, suggesting its influence in shaping the partnership agenda.

Overall, the study found that CSOs significantly influence decision-making processes within the EU-AU partnership through their roles as knowledge brokers, policy entrepreneurs, and advocates. Their inclusion contributes to more accountable and responsive policies that reflect the needs of communities on both continents. However, challenges persist in translating inclusive participation into concrete influence, underscoring the need for stronger mechanisms to ensure effective CSO engagement.

5.2. Theoretical reflections

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) provided a valuable lens for analyzing the dynamics of CSO engagement within the EU-AU partnership. By focusing on shared belief systems and coalition formation, the ACF helped illuminate how organizations like the Africa-Europe Foundation work to shape policy agendas and outcomes.

The framework's emphasis on policy-oriented learning and external events as drivers of change aligned well with the findings, which showed how CSOs adapt their strategies over time in response to evolving contexts and new information. The ACF's recognition of the role of knowledge and expertise in policy processes also resonated with the study's findings on the importance of evidence-based advocacy and the dual roles of think tanks as knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs.

However, some limitations of the ACF emerged in the context of this study. The framework's focus on domestic policy subsystems may not fully capture the complexity of interregional partnerships like the EU-AU, which involve multiple levels of governance and a wide range of state and non-state actors. The ACF also tends to emphasize stability and incremental change, which may not adequately account for the transformative potential of external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic in reshaping partnership priorities and dynamics.

Moreover, while the ACF acknowledges the importance of resources in coalition formation and policy influence, it may not fully capture the power asymmetries and structural barriers that shape CSO engagement in international contexts. The findings highlighted challenges such as funding constraints, capacity gaps, and unequal access to decision-making spaces, which are not always adequately addressed by the ACF.

Despite these limitations, the ACF proved to be a useful heuristic device for structuring the analysis and generating insights into the role of CSOs in the EU-AU partnership. The framework's attention to belief systems, coalition dynamics, and policy learning helped situate the Africa-Europe Foundation's influence within a broader context of advocacy and change.

Future research could build on this study by exploring how the ACF can be adapted or extended to better capture the specificities of interregional partnerships and the agency of CSOs in shaping policy from below. Integrating insights from other theoretical perspectives, such as transnational advocacy networks or critical policy studies, could help address some of the limitations identified and provide a more comprehensive understanding of CSO influence in complex multi-level governance contexts.

5.3. Research Process Reflections

Conducting this research has been a challenging and rewarding process that has yielded valuable insights into the role of CSOs in shaping the EU-AU partnership. The study's qualitative approach, combining interviews and document analysis, allowed for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives and strategies of key actors involved in the Africa-Europe Foundation and the broader partnership.

One of the strengths of the research process was the selection of the Africa-Europe Foundation as a pivotal case study. The Foundation's specific focus on EU-AU relations and its recognition



by both the EU and AU provided a rich context for examining CSO influence and coalition dynamics. The willingness of CSO representatives to engage in interviews and share their experiences and insights was also a key factor in the success of the study.

However, the research process also faced several challenges and limitations. Access to policymakers within the EU and AU institutions proved difficult, limiting the ability to triangulate CSO perspectives with those of decision-makers. The study's reliance on a single case study, while providing depth and nuance, may limit the generalizability of the findings to other CSOs or partnership contexts.

The evolving nature of the EU-AU partnership and the rapidly changing global context also presented challenges for the research. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, reshaped partnership priorities and CSO advocacy strategies in ways that could not have been fully anticipated at the outset of the study. Adapting the research design and analysis to account for these shifting dynamics required flexibility and ongoing reflection.

Another challenge was navigating the complex landscape of EU-AU relations and the multiple actors and agendas involved. The research process underscored the importance of situating CSO influence within a broader context of geopolitical interests, historical legacies, and institutional constraints. Balancing attention to these structural factors with a focus on CSO agency and advocacy required careful consideration and iteration throughout the research process.

Despite these challenges, the research process has yielded valuable insights that contribute to both academic and policy debates on the role of CSOs in interregional partnerships. The study's findings on the importance of coalition-building, evidence-based advocacy, and inclusive participation provide a foundation for future research and practice in this area.

Reflecting on the research process also highlights opportunities for further investigation. Future studies could explore the perspectives of a wider range of CSOs, including those focused on specific sectors or representing marginalized communities. Comparative analysis across different interregional partnerships could help identify patterns and best practices in CSO engagement. Longitudinal research could also provide insights into the long-term impacts of CSO advocacy and the sustainability of partnership outcomes.

Overall, the research process has underscored the complexity and dynamism of CSO influence in interregional partnerships. It has highlighted the importance of critical reflection, adaptability, and multi-stakeholder dialogue in navigating the challenges and opportunities of inclusive partnership-building. By shedding light on the experiences and strategies of the Africa-Europe Foundation and its CSO partners, this study aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen the EU-AU partnership and advance sustainable development on both continents.

5.4. Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, this section proposes several policy recommendations to enhance the inclusion and influence of CSOs in the EU-AU partnership. The recommendations are based on an in-depth analysis of the data collected from stakeholders and a comprehensive review of the literature.

1. Establishing clear and accessible mechanisms for CSO participation:

It would be advisable for the EU and AU to create formal channels for CSO input at all stages of the partnership, from agenda-setting to implementation and monitoring. This could include regular consultations, dedicated seats for CSO representatives in partnership bodies, and online platforms for ongoing dialogue and feedback. Moreover, in order to provide targeted support for CSO capacity-building, the EU and AU could invest in programs that strengthen the organizational, advocacy, and technical capacities of CSOs, particularly those representing marginalized communities or working in under-resourced sectors. This could include training, mentoring, and peer learning opportunities, as well as access to funding and other resources.

2. Fostering an enabling environment for CSO engagement:

In order to recognize and value the diversity of CSO voices, it would seem necessary for the EU and AU institutions to actively seek out and amplify the perspectives of a wide range of CSOs, including those working at grassroots and community levels. They should also acknowledge and address power imbalances within civil society, ensuring that marginalized groups have equal opportunities to influence partnership agendas and outcomes. One way to enhance CSOs engagement would be to create a conducive legal and political environment for CSO participation, including protecting the rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly. Promoting a culture of openness and transparency in partnership processes, with clear guidelines for information-sharing and accountability would also be relevant.



3. Strengthening the role of the Africa-Europe Foundation as a platform for CSO engagement:

Based on the actual role of AEF as a catalyst for civil society initiatives, the Foundation should continue to expand its outreach and inclusivity, engaging a broader range of CSOs and sectors in its activities. Support in this direction from the institutions involved in the EU-AU partnership would be necessary to provide sustained support, recognizing their value as spaces for dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and joint advocacy.

4. Integrating CSO expertise into evidence-based policymaking and establishing clear feedback loops and accountability mechanisms:

In order to better integrate CSO expertise into decision-making processes, it seems inevitable to develop a way to further use the knowledge and evidence generated by CSOs to inform partnership policies and programs. This could involve commissioning research, inviting CSO experts to provide testimony or advice, and creating opportunities for co-creation and joint problem-solving. Moreover, the creation of transparent systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of CSO engagement in the partnership, with regular opportunities for feedback and course correction is necessary to better assess their impact and areas for improvement. Therefore, it gives a sense of responsibility to CSOs, whose impact is clearly assessed, and to institutions who should also hold themselves accountable for implementing CSO recommendations and commitments, with clear targets and timelines for action.

5. Fostering a culture of mutual learning and trust, and aligning partnership priorities:

It would be interesting for the EU and the AU to invest in building relationships of trust and mutual understanding between policymakers and CSOs, recognizing their shared commitment to sustainable development. They should create spaces for dialogue and exchange, promoting a spirit of partnership and collaboration rather than competition or mistrust. A first step in this way would be to align partnership priorities with CSO agendas and expertise to ensure that they reflect the concerns of CSOs, particularly those working on the ground in communities most affected by development challenges. They should also be open to adapting partnership agendas in response to changing contexts and emerging issues identified by CSOs.

6. Promoting policy coherence and coordination across sectors and levels:

Finally, to ensure an effective inclusion of different stakeholders from civil society in the EU-AU partnership, it would be interesting to go further in the development of coherent and



coordinated partnership policies and programs across different sectors and levels of governance, from local to global. To maximize synergies and impact, it needs to be combined with an alignment between the EU-AU partnership and other relevant frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

By implementing these recommendations, the EU and AU can create a more inclusive, responsive, and effective partnership that harnesses the knowledge, expertise, and advocacy of CSOs to drive sustainable development on both continents. Strengthening the role of CSOs in the partnership can help ensure that policies and programs are grounded in the needs and aspirations of communities, and that the benefits of cooperation are shared equitably across societies.

Ultimately, the success of the EU-AU partnership will depend on the ability of all stakeholders - including governments, CSOs, and the private sector - to work together in a spirit of mutual respect, trust, and accountability. By centring the voices and agency of civil society, the partnership can build a more inclusive and sustainable development.

5.5. Final remarks

This thesis has highlighted the significant role that civil society organizations (CSOs) play in shaping the EU-AU partnership and advancing sustainable development on both continents. Through their roles as knowledge brokers, policy entrepreneurs, and advocates, CSOs contribute to more accountable and responsive policies that reflect the needs of communities. However, challenges remain in ensuring effective CSO engagement and translating inclusive participation into concrete influence. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including policymakers, CSOs, and researchers. By strengthening mechanisms for CSO engagement, enhancing capacity building, fostering inclusive dialogue, ensuring transparency and accountability, and supporting research and knowledge sharing, the EU-AU partnership can be further strengthened to achieve its vision for 2030. This research contributes to the literature on interregional partnerships, civil society inclusion, and the role of think tanks in shaping foreign policy, offering valuable insights for those working to advance sustainable development and cooperation between the EU and AU. Ultimately, the future of the EU-AU partnership depends on the ability to translate dialogue into concrete actions and to meaningfully involve civil society in all its diversity.



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