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# Rethinking Partnerships

Exploring the EU's Development Cooperation in  
Central America via Critical Discourse Analysis  
and Expert Interviews

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## Abstract

The European Union (EU) is the largest provider of development aid in the world, considering the funds given by its institutions and Member States. Development cooperation has been a central policy theme since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, thus constituting a significant sphere of the EU's foreign affairs. In this context, the concept of partnership covers a meaningful role, and has lately gained momentum with the emphasis laid by Von Der Leyen's Commission. Nevertheless, partnerships are more than a policy 'buzzword', and the EU's donor-recipient approach raises questions in terms of power relations.

This study aims to explore the discourse on partnerships applied in the EU's development cooperation in Central America. To do so, the *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces For a Common Future* (2019) are analysed. Intertextuality is achieved by taking into consideration *The New European Consensus on Development: 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'* (2017) and *The Americas and the Caribbean - Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027* (2021). In addition to researching which power relations they convey, I look at their impact on EU-Central American partnerships, and how this discourse can be reformed.

This process is guided by the lens of post-colonial theory, in addition to operationalising the concepts of partnership and agency. This thesis conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's approach. Three intersecting degrees of analysis are applied, ranging from the text analysis of the aforementioned EU's policy texts to the understanding of the discourse and social practice. This CDA is complemented by a categorical analysis of seven expert interviews which provide a bottom-up perspective.

As a result, it can be argued that the EU is not a fully-fledged post-colonial development actor, but still an emerging one. This can negatively affect the partnership with Central America, as a neo-colonial donor-receiver relation can reproduce asymmetries. A more equal development discourse could be possible, as demonstrated by the experiences of NGOs and intergovernmental organisations. The EU's focus should shift from material resources to more self-reflection, mutual recognition, and the creation of sustainable shared impact.

Keywords: Development, Partnerships, European Union, Central America, Discourse.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>ACP</b>	African, Caribbean and Pacific
<b>CDA</b>	Critical Discourse Analysis
<b>CIPREVICA</b>	Research Centre for the Violence Prevention in Central America
<b>Consensus</b>	The New European Consensus on Development: ‘Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future’
<b>DG DEVCO</b>	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
<b>DG INTPA</b>	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
<b>DG8</b>	Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation
<b>DIGNITY</b>	Danish Institute Against Torture
<b>EC</b>	European Communities
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICG</b>	International Contact Group
<b>IILA</b>	Italo-Latin American International Organisation
<b>IM</b>	Swedish Development Partner
<b>Joint Communication</b>	Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces For a Common Future
<b>LAC</b>	Latin America and the Caribbean
<b>SICA</b>	Central American Integration System
<b>SweFOR</b>	Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation
<b>Multiannual</b>	The Americas and the Caribbean - Regional Multiannual
<b>Indicative Programme</b>	Indicative Programme 2021-2027

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. *Definition and Relevance of the Research Topic*

The EU is collectively the largest aid donor in the world,<sup>1</sup> a sum that represents around 10 per cent of its external action's budget.<sup>2</sup> This active role in the field has been pursued since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, thus delineating more than seventy years of efforts in development cooperation. To implement its programmes, the EU collaborates with a wide range of development actors across the world. In this regard, the current Von Der Leyen's Commission has placed increased emphasis on the concept of partnerships. In 2019, the position of Commissioner for International Partnerships was introduced, a role currently held by Jutta Urpilainen. This was then remarked by the makeover of the former Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), which became Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) in 2021. This revamped focus on partnerships for development reflects the interest of the EU in strengthening its position as a global development actor. Nevertheless, the EU's approach to partnerships and donor-recipient relations raises questions in terms of power imbalances.

This thesis is written in collaboration with The Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY), under the co-supervision of Henrik Rønsbo, the Director of DIGNITY LAB. During the Autumn Semester 2021, I was an intern in the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the Lab, where I also had the chance to deepen my knowledge of partnerships between European and Central American NGOs.

Drawing from this experience, I have been inspired to reflect upon the principles behind development cooperation and its implications. With one of the highest violence and homicide rates in the world,<sup>3</sup> Central America represents a relevant case study for international aid. The EU has had a long-term presence in the area, acquiring a more relevant role during the Esquipulas Peace Agreement in the mid-1980s. Nowadays, this region is

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, "Recipients and Results of EU Aid," accessed May 6, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/human-rights-non-eu-countries/recipients-and-results-eu-aid\\_en#:~:text=Related%20links-.Overview,poverty%20and%20advance%20global%20development](https://ec.europa.eu/info/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/human-rights-non-eu-countries/recipients-and-results-eu-aid_en#:~:text=Related%20links-.Overview,poverty%20and%20advance%20global%20development).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, "Funding," accessed May 6, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/funding\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/funding_en).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Global Study on Homicide," accessed May 6, 2022, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>.

seeing a reduction of the EU's aid funds, as they are increasingly allocated to the Neighbourhood countries and Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the structural issues of Central America. In light of these challenges, it is important to explore how the EU is currently articulating its partnerships for social cohesion in the region, as these power relations have not been a prominent topic in recent research.

## *1.2. Research Questions*

In this study, I intend to analyse the current discourse conveyed by the EU as a shifting development actor in Central America. In order to fulfil this overarching purpose, the following specific research questions will be addressed:

- 1) Which discourse is promoted by the EU's development cooperation in Central America?
- 2) How does this discourse influence EU-Central American partnerships?
- 3) How can the EU's development discourse be reformed in a more equal way?

By exploring this field, I hope to achieve more clarity regarding the development partnerships envisioned by the EU's policy efforts in Central America. At the same time, it will be relevant to explore whether and how this discourse can be reformed to better represent all the involved stakeholders. To answer these research questions, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the *Joint Communication*, while I have carried out seven expert interviews to grasp the practices of working with development. More specifically, the NGOs and intergovernmental organisations represented by the experts are DIGNITY, the Research Centre for the Violence Prevention in Central America (CIPREVICA), the Italo-Latin American International Organisation (IILA), the Swedish Development Partner (IM), and the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (SweFOR).

## *1.3. Structure of the Thesis*

This thesis is structured over five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, thus including an overview of its definition and relevance (Section 1.1.), a list of the research

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, "Global Europe: Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument," accessed May 6, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/global-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/global-europe_en).

questions (Section 1.2.), the overall structure (Section 1.3.) and the limitations of this study (Section 1.4.).

Chapter 2 sets out to contextualise the EU's development cooperation in Central America, by presenting the literature review and theoretical framework of this study. This phenomenon is firstly outlined by giving a historical background from the Treaty of Rome until the present day, by then delimiting the geographical frame to relations with Central America (Section 2.1.1.). This part is completed by an overview of the theoretical understandings of the EU as a development actor (Section 2.1.2.), ranging from a civilian to a post-colonial approach. The lens then shifts to post-development theory, taking into consideration the critics towards the concept of development (Section 2.2.). The chapter continues with the explanation of the concepts of agency and partnership applied in this study (Section 2.3.), and ends with the main points that can be drawn and applied in the discussion (Section 2.4.).

Chapter 3 tables the methodological framework, by firstly presenting the data collection procedures and their limitations (Section 3.1.), respectively by describing the sampling of EU policy documents (Section 3.1.1.) and that of interviews (Section 3.1.2.). Critical Discourse Analysis (Section 3.2.) is then introduced, explaining it as a method (Section 3.2.1.) and its application in the current thesis (Section 3.2.2.). The same is done for expert interviews (Section 3.3.), as they are described as a method (Section 3.3.1.) and then how they were analysed (Section 3.3.2.).

Chapter 4 introduces the research results and analyses them, based on the research questions, theory and methodology outlined in the previous sections. The text analysis (Section 4.1.) starts by presenting the EU's Development discourse in Central America and its social context Analysis of the Discursive Practice (Section 4.1.1.), to then move on to the analysis of the *Joint Communication* (Section 4.1.2.). The second part of the chapter shows the categorical analysis of interviews (Section 4.2.). The chapter ends with an evaluation of the research objectives, and methods (Section 4.3.).

Ultimately, chapter 5 includes the final remarks, by summarising the results (Section 5.1.) as well as their implications for future research (Section 5.2.).



#### *1.4. Limitations of the Study*

Acknowledging the shortcomings of this study is essential to delineate the complete framework of the research design. The main limitations have been identified as follows:

- **Subjectivity:** In the qualitative method of expert interviews, the selection of participants is related to the nature of the study defined by the interviewer. For this reason, this choice entailed a certain degree of subjectivity. In addition, during my internship at DIGNITY in Autumn 2021, I had collaborated with three of the interviewees, thus positioning myself in closer proximity to the thesis' subject. To avoid biases, other four interviews have been conducted, and they have been paired with the analysis of policy documents of the EU. In addition, as I am an Italian and European citizen based in Sweden, I have reflected on my own's assumptions, in order not to reproduce Eurocentric views throughout the research process. I have pursued this introspection by following agency's and post-colonial scholarship, hoping to have minimised this factor.
- **Analytical limitations:** To avoid lack of clarity and complexity in the research design, I have systematically applied the three stages of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis by starting from policy documents. The interview's results were combined in the social practice. Since the experts were answering questions I had prepared in advance, I did not carry out a text analysis of the transcripts, which were instead essential to portray the wider situational context and provide practical views on the enactment of the EU's development cooperation.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The following chapter aims to introduce the relevant conceptual ideas which constitute the theoretical framework of this study. The first section provides a background of the EU's development policy and then gives an account of different interpretations of the EU as a development actor. This part is followed by a presentation of post-development approaches, collecting the contributions of the most prominent scholars of this school of thought. This chapter then dwells on the explanation of two key concepts applied in this research, namely the notions of agency and partnership in development. Lastly, a conclusion with the main points that can be drawn from this chapter is inserted, in addition to an explanation of how they will be used in the discussion (Chapter 4).

### *2.1. Confronting the Post-Colonial Challenge in the EU's Development Policy*

#### *2.1.1. Background on the EU's Development Policy*

The process of formation of the EU as a development aid provider has been characterised by two main transformations. The first aspect is a change in the focus on geographical areas, moving from preferential treatment of former colonies to a more liberalised and securitised approach. Secondly, there was a shift in values and goals, from subsidisation of infrastructures and economic growth to pursuing security, poverty eradication and more regional solutions.

The EU is the largest provider of development aid in the world, counting the overall funds disbursed both by the EU and its Member States via their bilateral agreements. However, this observation reveals little about the complexity of actors and mandates entangled in the multi-level coordination of this shared EU competence. Development aid is a common European interest, already figuring in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, when the European Economic Community (EEC) was established. The agreement included the creation of the European Development Fund (EDF), which ensured a collective approach for financing aid

to third countries through the subsidisation of infrastructures and economic growth.<sup>5</sup> Among the six founding Member States, France was the most outspoken in terms of development interests, indeed exerting its influence on closing preferential trade agreements with African countries.<sup>6</sup> In the 1960s, this approach significantly moulded the Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation (DG8) of the European Commission, due to the predominance of former French colonial officials employed as new European bureaucrats. During this period, the tasks of DG8 followed principles very similar to the French indirect rule, as the distribution of funds and their implementation depended to a large extent on personal ties with the African elite.<sup>7</sup> With the accession of the UK during the first European Communities' (EC) enlargement in 1973, the development policy became more centred around African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, combining former Anglophone and Francophone colonies. The aid and trade agreements with the ACP group were formalised with the Lomé Agreement, starting in 1975.

Meanwhile, the interest in Latin American countries was relatively low until the 1980s, when tensions in Central America exacerbated. During that decade, more considerable development funds began to be issued by the EC, especially after the entrance of Greece, Portugal and Spain in 1986, due to the colonial past of the latter two countries. It can be noticed how, also in that period, the EU's development aid's logic still revealed a colonial approach, as the sphere of interest primarily included former colonies. Development was enshrined as a shared competence between the newly established European Union and the Member States in 1993 by the Maastricht Treaty. The decade that followed led to more structured development policies, with the EU becoming a full-fledged development donor, within a geographical framework that was thought of going beyond the former colonies.<sup>8</sup> In 2000, the Cotonou Agreement was adopted. It introduced the principle of aid conditionality, meaning that allocation of aid became based on needs and performance, and the Economic

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Langan and Sophia Price, "The EU's Development Policy: Forging Relations of Dependence?" in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies*, eds. Didier Bigo, Thomas Diez, Evangelos Fanoulis, Ben Rosamond, and Yannis A. Stivachtis (London: Routledge, 2020), 503.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Orbie, "The EU's Role in Development: A Full-Fledged Development Actor or Eclipsed by Superpower Temptations?," in *The European Union and Global Development: An 'Enlightened Superpower' in the Making?*, eds. Stefan Gänzle, Sven Grimm, and Davina Makhani (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Véronique Dimier, *The Invention Of A European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 33-35.

<sup>8</sup> Orbie, "The EU's Role in Development," 20.

Partnership Agreements (EPAs), new free trade agreements.<sup>9</sup> This liberalisation can be regarded as a move from the former preferential treatment of some regions.

Nevertheless, after 9/11, the EU's development assistance became more 'securitised', meaning that a significant part of aid flows was redirected towards fragile states which could pose more concerning threats in terms of organised crime and terrorism.<sup>10</sup> Another crucial step in the development framework of the EU was the recognition of the eradication of poverty as a common goal. *The European Consensus on Development* of 2005 then envisioned a more coordinated approach to development between EU institutions and their counterparts in the Member States, by defining common objectives and values.<sup>11</sup> A substantial contribution is then to be acknowledged to the Lisbon Treaty, which in 2007 strengthened the Maastricht's provisions, by providing a specific legal basis for humanitarian aid and further specifying the strong commitment to development coordination between the *communautaire* and national level.<sup>12</sup> The negotiations held in Lisbon also set the institutional framework for the European External Action Service (EEAS), the diplomatic agency tasked with managing the EU's external relations. Ten years later, in 2017, the EU institutions reached an agreement on *The New European Consensus on Development: 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'*, a policy which will be mentioned in Chapter 4, as it sets the new EU framework for development partnerships. This document is also of the utmost relevance as it gave a new meaning to the security-development nexus which had been pursued by the EU in the previous fifteen years, by indeed de-securitising the EU's development discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world, and many of its countries, labelled as fragile states from a development-security perspective, have thus often figured on the receiving end of development programmes.<sup>14</sup> Regarding aid from European donors, ties between the two regions were scarce until the mid-1970s. After that, the EC began to slowly manifest more interest in trade, aid and regional integration to foster stability in the

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<sup>9</sup> Maurizio Carbone, *The European Union and International Development: The Politics of Foreign Aid* (London: Routledge, 2011), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Ayuso and Susanne Grätius, "The EU-LAC Strategic Partnership under Revision: Towards a More Differentiated Relationship," *Global Affairs* 7, no. 4 (September 2021): 564.

<sup>11</sup> Orbie, "The EU's Role in Development," 20.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Orbie and Simon Lightfoot, "Development: Shallow Europeanisation?," in *Foreign Policies of EU Member States: Continuity and Europeanisation*, eds. Amelia Hadfield, Ian Mannes and Richard G. Whitham (London: Routledge, 2017), 203.

<sup>13</sup> Ayuso and Grätius, "The EU-LAC Strategic Partnership under Revision," 565.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 570.

area. Nevertheless, the real watershed followed in 1986, when EC's efforts became more focused due to the entrance of Portugal and Spain, and the political will to resolve the Central American crisis by opposing the US military approach.<sup>15</sup> As stated by Smith, "The EC manifested an ability to devise a specific EC policy that emphasised regional and political solutions, stressed socio-economic factors as causes, and opposed the use of military instruments and intervention"<sup>16</sup>. These principles guided the European Council's Meeting in San José in 1984, an unprecedented event where European and Central American politicians gathered without the US to negotiate an end to the crisis that was wounding the region.<sup>17</sup>

The end of the civil wars in the early 1990s paved the way for a renewed impetus for regional integration, a process which culminated with the establishment of the Central American Integration System (SICA) in 1993.<sup>18</sup> This milestone signalled for the EU the shift towards a bilateral development and cooperation relationship with a partner that was regarded to be more stable due to its regional integration process. The reinvigorated accord was firstly formalised with the signing of the Framework Cooperation Agreement in 1993 and the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement in 2003.<sup>19</sup> These circumstances bear echoes of Bachmann's concept of 'European spaces of development', defined as "[...] a combination of development aid, attempts to regulate spaces of interaction and the promotion of intra- and interregional cooperation [...]".<sup>20</sup> One of the results of this framework was EUROsociAL, a 15-year EU programme aimed at improving levels of social cohesion in nineteen Latin American countries, by funnelling its actions in three areas: gender equality, democratic governance and social policy. In 2007, negotiations for an association agreement revolving around political dialogue and cooperation pillars were initialised, and in 2013, the EU became an observer to SICA, underlining an increased commitment to free trade and sustainable development.<sup>21</sup> To achieve a more overarching understanding of how partnerships between these two regional entities are currently developing, the *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council* -

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<sup>15</sup> Hazel Smith, *European Union Foreign Policy and Central America* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 56

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 78-79.

<sup>18</sup> Roberto Dominguez, *EU Foreign Policy towards Latin America* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Veit Bachmann, "European Spaces of Development: Aid, Regulation and Regional Integration," in *Europe in the World: EU Geopolitics and the Transformation of European Space*, ed. Luiza Bialasiewicz (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Dominguez, *EU Foreign Policy towards Latin America*, 87-89.

*European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces For a Common Future* (2019) issued by the EU will be used as the main document in the discussion chapter of this thesis. In addition, *The Americas and the Caribbean - Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027* (2021) will be instrumental in capturing how the EU's overall strategic objectives for its external action in terms of international economic recovery after COVID-19.

### 2.1.2. *From a Civilian to a Post-Colonial Development Actor*

The multifaceted role that the EU plays in the world has formed the basis for vast academic reflections, leading to the creation of a plethora of labels to depict the EU as a global actor. A certain number of these conceptualisations are of relevance when studying the EU's actions in the development field, as they aim to portray the power relations conveyed by the EU.

One of the first prominent interpretations was that of 'civilian power' formulated by François Duchêne in 1973, stating that the then-EC ought to pursue a civilian scope in its external relations, based on its economic, cultural, and social premises rather than military ones.<sup>22</sup> Taking the civilian argument further, Freres (2000) affirmed that the EU should set an example as a generous aid donor and diplomatic actor, by opposing interventionist approaches, just as it did in Central America in the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> Another crucial contribution to this literature is represented by Manners' 'normative power Europe' (2002), underlining the EU's ability to exert international influence through the appeal of its rules. In this sense, the EU is depicted as a power whose ideas have the ability to set a virtuous example for other countries' legislative frameworks.<sup>24</sup> Along these lines, Mark Leonard (2005) further delineated the EU as a 'transformative power', with the power of reshaping the world according to its values and norms.<sup>25</sup> Lisbeth Aggestam's concept of 'ethical power Europe' (2008) was then regarded as transcending both the civilian and normative debate, by applying universal ethics to the alleged EU's proactive efforts to change the world, guided

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<sup>22</sup> François Duchêne, "The European Community and Uncertainties of Interdependence," in *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign Policy Problems before the European Community*, eds. Max Kohnstamm and Wolfgang Hager (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Christian Freres, "The European Union as a Global 'Civilian Power': Development Cooperation in EU-Latin American Relations," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 238-239.

<sup>25</sup> Cit. in María García, "The European Union and Latin America: 'Transformative Power Europe' versus the Realities of Economic Interests," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2015): 622.

by a vision of 'global common good'.<sup>26</sup> As expressed by Jan Orbie (2012), "This broad literature has in common that the EU is considered to be a new kind of international actor, a *sui generis* construction that somehow transcends the old-fashioned power politics and the direct pursuit of interests".<sup>27</sup>

Nowadays, these concepts seem less adequate in conceptualising the EU's role in the international system. Indeed, more discourses on the EU as a superpower are emerging, whereby the increased focus on its international status may come to the detriment of progressive development aims.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, Orbie's conception of the EU as an 'enlightened superpower' (2012) is seen to constitute a first step forward, as it sets out to propose a balance between solid normative premises and a powerful role in the world order.<sup>29</sup> As recognised by Orbie himself, such intensified ambitions must imperatively be paired with sustainable and genuine development commitments, to avoid falling into a mere neo-colonialist logic whereby the EU acts as an enlightened donor superior to non-European stakeholders.<sup>30</sup>

Shedding light on the neo- and post-colonial power plays that can intersect the EU's development discourse is important to discuss the creation of partnerships. This acquires even greater relevance taking into consideration the broad implications it can trigger, as "No other policy operates so effectively as a vehicle for the values, intentions and goals of the EU in the world as does its development policy".<sup>31</sup> This means that development actions play a relevant role in spreading the EU's interests across the world, and they can also do harm if the intentions or implementation are wrong. In the critical words of Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2013), "[...] Europeans have managed to create and fine-tune their Union over the past 50 years in a fascinating kind of 'virgin birth' - as if the new entity had nothing to do with the past of its most powerful Member States. In short, Eurocentrism stubbornly survived imperialism".<sup>32</sup> This quote described the risks of intentionally forgetting a past where the inequality of power relations dominated. For this reason, achieving a more

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<sup>26</sup> Lisbeth Aggestam, "Introduction: Ethical Power Europe?," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 84, no. 1 (January, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Orbie, "The EU's Role in Development," 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 31-33.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Amelia Hadfield and Simon Lightfoot, "Shifting Priorities of the EU as a Development Actor: Context and Consequences," *Global Affairs* 7, no. 4 (September 2021): 494.

<sup>32</sup> Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power," *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (June 2013): 284.

comprehensive and informed understanding of the EU's role in development ought to include the implications of the colonial legacies of many of its Member States. Such an undertaking needs to go beyond the more superficial 'values-versus interests' dichotomy as that might risk obscuring the latent colonial bequests that can still affect the EU's actions.<sup>33</sup>

In general, the vision that tends to be conveyed when studying the EU's external relations seems to adhere to a Eurocentric approach, thereby often neglecting the perspectives of non-European actors, including aid recipient countries. Even when the colonial origins of EU development policy are acknowledged, their consequences in terms of reinforcing dependencies, justifying interventions, or obstructing systemic change are frequently overseen.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, a vital theoretical reflection for the aims of this thesis has been formulated by Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2013), who opted for applying a post-colonial approach to what they depict as 'Global EU External Action Studies'. 'Post'-colonial analytically refers to confronting the replication of hierarchies, while, in normative terms, it operationalises the transcendence of Eurocentric logics.<sup>35</sup> Rethinking the EU under the lens of a 'post-colonial power' approach and decentring its external agenda entails a three-step journey constituted by provincialisation, engagement and reconstruction.<sup>36</sup> The first undertaking questions the civilisational primacy of European experiences, by recognising that such perspectives and agendas have a particularistic rather than universal nature.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, engagement requires a more profound commitment to exploring how non-European actors perceive the EU. Such an endeavour constitutes the founding stone for a dialogical exchange of perspectives, practices and understandings of mutual constitution, in terms of detecting the internalisation of Eurocentric legacies.<sup>38</sup> The last necessary move is represented by the reconstruction phase, reflecting the need to identify the Eurocentric pitfalls in EU Policies to be able to really recalibrate the course of action of the EU as a post-colonial power, committed to common goals.<sup>39</sup> The EU, to proactively act as a post-colonial power, should pursue the imperatives of mutuality and empowerment, by undertaking

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<sup>33</sup> Jan Orbie, "The Graduation of EU Development Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Turn?," *Global Affairs* 7, no. 4 (September 2021): 600.

<sup>34</sup> Orbie, "The Graduation of EU Development Studies," 598.

<sup>35</sup> Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The Decentering Agenda: A Post-Colonial Approach to EU External Action," in *The External Action of the European Union: Concepts, Approaches, Theories*, eds. Sieglinde Gstöhl and Simon Schunz (London: Macmillian Academic, 2021), 289.

<sup>36</sup> Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, "Europe as a Post-Colonial Power," 285.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 286-289.

<sup>38</sup> Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, "A Post-Colonial Approach to EU External Action," 292-293.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 293.



systematic mitigation of asymmetries and by genuinely recognising other polities.<sup>40</sup> This decentring agenda appears to be instrumental both in terms of understanding the challenges posed by a multipolar and non-European global order, and in truly reinventing the EU's actions in the development sphere. In addition, embracing this post-colonial approach can allow for a critical reflection on the human rights agenda, with the aim of paying more attention to local agency in the global South without blindly imposing Western canons.

## 2.2. *Theorising Post-Development*

With the growth of post-colonial studies, the field of development studies has been shaken by a wave of criticism and the need for rethinking its premises, to the extent that the legitimacy of development itself has been questioned. More critical self-examination practices in terms of research objectives and methods were undertaken by development experts, both within the academia and the NGOs world.<sup>41</sup> In the 1980s, with the influence of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1979), this critical turn in development studies began to include the application of post-structuralist ideas, meaning that development was increasingly regarded as a way to exert power and social control.<sup>42</sup>

In this context, a ground-breaking critique was that pushed forward by the Colombian scholar Arturo Escobar, who, based on Foucault's concepts of modern power, discourse, and knowledge, denounced development as yet another tactic for undercover Western domination and called upon the need for alternatives.<sup>43</sup> Escobar's ideas pioneered the post-development current, by describing development as an intrinsic part of the Western hegemonic discourse of progress. According to him, this ambition was manifested in Truman's inaugural speech as US President in 1949, as he envisaged a new role for his country, in terms of solving the problems of the world's 'underdeveloped areas'.<sup>44</sup> Adhering to this conception, the development discourse was seen as pursuing a sole replication of economic, political and social features of 'advanced' countries after the Second World War, aiming to drastically transform countries that did not uphold Western benchmarks. In this framework, the expression 'Third World' was seen as a negative label produced by the

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<sup>40</sup> Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, "Europe as a Post-Colonial Power," 295.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick, *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments, Alternatives* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2015), 240-241.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

<sup>43</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

development discourse, shaping how reality can be imagined, interpreted and dealt with.<sup>45</sup> This representation was counteracted by the idea that the ‘Third World’ offers manifold and multiple models of society, economy and agency, as enshrined in the relevance of grassroots movement and local knowledge.

This current of thought became more prominent towards the end of the 1980s, when an increased number of authors outlined their will to reject development in its entirety, by finding alternatives to it.<sup>46</sup> A summary of these views is given in the essay collection *The Post-Development Reader* (1997), where they stress the necessity for radical pluralism, simple living, degrowth and a non-capitalist society.<sup>47</sup> While acknowledging the plurality and effectiveness of local voices, and the need to downscale economic production and consumption on one side, this contribution also imagined a simple life in ecological and spiritual terms.<sup>48</sup> This position sometimes entailed romanticising local alternatives or denying conditions like poverty, while condemning any Western influence, including scientific discoveries.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, as stated by Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick, “There should be a struggle to reorient developmental thought and practice rather than dismissing the entire modern developmental project as a negative power play”.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, a line should be drawn to identify the potential benefits emerging from development programmes and how they risk being ruined by an implementation based on the imposition of Western premises.

It can be noticed how there are intersecting theoretical underpinnings between post-colonial and post-development literature, but ultimately the latter proposes more radical reconfigurations of power structures, plunging into a ‘pluriverse’ of alternatives to development. Due to the space constraints of this thesis, the discussion will not allow for too articulated post-development reflections on partnerships. The discussion will instead adopt a post-colonial approach, but inspirations from the post-development thought in terms of focus on local knowledge will still be relevant.

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<sup>45</sup> Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>47</sup> Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds.), *The Post-Development Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> Peet and Hartwick, *Theories of Development*, 264.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 266.

### 2.3. *Conceptualising Agency and Partnership*

In order to provide a more thorough theoretical background, the concepts of agency and partnership applied in this thesis are hereafter clarified.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a growing amount of scholarship has begun to acknowledge the rising role of some developing countries on the world stage, following their trade growth, their ability to exert increasing influence on policy outcomes and to hold donors accountable. This strengthened agency has also signified that, in some instances, the separation between developed and developing countries has become harder to identify.<sup>51</sup> In such an evolving context, the EU cannot assume that its policies and values will be accepted *a priori* by recipient countries, due to their means of reconfiguring EU interests, and the possibilities provided by the emergence of alternative actors for new global partnerships.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, here arises the need to explore the concept of agency, by reviewing competing schools of thought within philosophy and development studies. As defined by Garikipati and Olsen (2008), agency refers to the capacity to act, but the actual debated question is ‘who’ or ‘what’ is identified as the agent of social change.<sup>53</sup> From a philosophical perspective, the debate revolves around two main polarised conceptualisations, in terms of structuralism and atomism. While the former asserts that macro-structures, including governmental and non-governmental development agencies, are the sole agents, the latter understands agency by reducing it to the free choices of every single individuum.<sup>54</sup>

Due to the inherent issues that arise from these opposing views, a middle ground is found in the argument that agency “[...] is the capacity of any social actor to act; agents behave according to their internal composition and history, and their external relations”.<sup>55</sup> In this thesis, this concept aims to be equally applied to European and Central American stakeholders, thus envisioning a relational framework that does not neglect the latter’s agency and lived experiences, but instead regards them as a powerful vehicle of transformative change. When discussing partnerships for development projects in Central America, it is crucial to recognise how local people should be actively involved and how

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<sup>51</sup> Maurizio Carbone, “International Development and the European Union’s External Policies: Changing Contexts, Problematic Nexuses, Contested Partnerships,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 3 (2013): 485.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 493-494.

<sup>53</sup> Supriya Garikipati and Wendy Olsen, “The Role of Agency in the Development Process and Development Planning,” *International Journal of Development Planning* 30, no. 4 (December 2008): 327.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 327-328.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

their place-based knowledge should be a key added value not to be subdued to Eurocentric assumptions. In this sense, partners from developing countries are not passive receivers of aid and globalised discourses, such as the human rights agenda, but they positively contribute to their interpretation and amelioration in a dialogic process.<sup>56</sup> The view of agency applied in this thesis aims to go beyond an individualist understanding, meaning that its enactment depends on social relations, groups dynamics and context-specific elements. This concept is well-elaborated by the words of the feminist scholar Maria Lugones, as “[...] collective struggle in the reconstruction and transformation of structures is fundamental”.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, each subject taking part in efforts of collective agency is characterised by pluralism, indicating that each person can be influenced by different experiences of the same phenomenon.<sup>58</sup> It can thus be seen how agency represents a complex exchange of visions and relations, drawing from a background of multiple understandings.

In the international aid system, the concept of partnership has assumed a central position since the 1970s, when it came to describe the “[...] humanitarian, moral, political, ideological or spiritual solidarity [...]” between development actors from the North and South collaborating for a common social change.<sup>59</sup> In the decades that followed, the term partnership has been both misused and overused, to the detriment of its credibility. In this regard, it is essential to acknowledge that partnerships only form one of the possible sets of relationships in the development field. They are indeed the most overarching ones in terms of rights and obligations, as they should entail, among other characteristics, a long-term involvement, mutual and joint responsibilities, respect, accountability, equality, and bilateral acceptance of conditions, without altering the values of the involved parties.<sup>60</sup>

The notion of partnership is not an innovative endeavour in the framework of the EU’s development policy, regardless of the renewed emphasis in Von der Leyen’s Commission.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, its implementation still proves to include problematic aspects due to the power imbalances it entails. In this regard, a relevant conceptualisation of partnership in

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<sup>56</sup> Shannon Speed and Xochitl Leyva Solano, “Global Discourses on the Local Terrain: Human Rights in Chiapas,” in *Human Rights in the Maya Region*, eds. Pedro Pitarce, Shannon Speed and Xochitl Leyva Solano (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 62.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> Alan Fowler, “Partnerships: Negotiating Relationships - A Resource for Non-Governmental Development Organisations,” *INTRAC Occasional Paper*, no. 32, (March 2000): 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>61</sup> Johanne Døhlie Saltnes and Sebastian Steingass, “Fit for Creating Partnerships of Equals with the Global South? Tensions in the EU’s Development Policy Post-2020,” *Global Affairs* 7, no. 4 (September 2021): 525.

development is that advanced by Saltnes and Steingass (2021), based on non-domination and participation. In their view, partnerships “[...] may be formed despite asymmetrical differences in capacities, power or financial clout but depend on partners not imposing their will on others and allowing for collaborative arrangements whereby affected parties would be given a due hearing”.<sup>62</sup> This understanding of partnership, is instrumental for this thesis, as it intersects some of the premises of the post-colonial approach.

## 2.4. *Conclusion*

This chapter has presented the theoretical premises of this thesis. The main points to draw relate to how the EU’s role in development has been conceptualised, ranging from a civilian to a post-colonial development actor. In the discussion chapter, it will indeed be argued to which extent the EU is a post-colonial power, and how this influences partnerships with Central America. The three-levelled approach by Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis will be used to understand how the EU’s development practices are scoring in terms of provincialisation, engagement and reconstruction in Central America. For this reason, the analysis of this thesis will adopt a post-colonial approach rather than a post-development one, as it does not aim to reject development in its entirety. Nevertheless, the reflections of Escobar and post-development scholars from the end of the 1980s will influence the approach to the plurality and effectiveness of local knowledge. Moreover, the concepts of partnership and agency will also be instrumental for the discussion, as they will constitute the two main themes of the analysis of discursive practices. In this sense, they will be operationalised, to see how they are elaborated across texts. Both categories will then be enacted by the results of the interviews with experts, as they allow for practical reflections on how to create more equal partnerships and make sure that all voices are included.

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<sup>62</sup> Døhlie Saltnes and Steingass, “Fit for Creating Partnerships of Equals with the Global South?,” 536.

### 3. Methodological Framework

The following chapter aims to explain the methodological toolset which has been applied to explore the partnerships discourse in the context of the European Union development policy in Central America. First, the criteria that guided the data collection are presented, in parallel with the limitations of the sampling. This section is followed by an introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis and, more specifically, Fairclough's three-dimensional approach, constituting the main methodological framework of this thesis. The last part of this chapter focuses on the method of expert interviews, regarded as qualitative interviews with a particular social group.

#### 3.1. *Data Collection and Limitations*

The empirical materials used in this thesis as a basis for analytical reflections pertain to two different categories, namely EU policy documents and interview transcripts.

##### 3.1.1. *Sampling of EU Policy Documents*

After an initial overview of relevant texts issued by the EU in the field of global partnerships for humanitarian aid, the focus was laid more specifically on the *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces For a Common Future* (2019). This Communication proposes strategies to reinforce the political partnership between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, by envisioning a stronger bi-regional partnership. To better capture the intertextuality of this document, *The New European Consensus on Development: 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'* (2017) and *The Americas and the Caribbean - Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027* (2021) will also be taken into consideration. These two selected documents are instrumental in analysing how the partnerships discourse is respectively envisioned by the EU in general terms and then with a focus on The American and the Caribbean, including an important sub-window on Central America.

Analysing official written documents brought more objectivity to this work, to complement the fact that, during my internship at the Danish Institute Against Torture, I was very close to the field I am researching and I have previously worked with two of the interviewed

experts. At the same time, since studying the partnerships discourse in these EU policy documents reflected a top-down institutional approach, it was paired with a bottom-up perspective to voice vaster interpretations around this theme.

### *3.1.2. Sampling of Interviews*

In order to explore the understanding of actors involved in these different levels of international development, interviews have been carried out, by contacting experts from NGOs and intergovernmental organisations based in the EU and in Central America, connected to EU Commission's or the EU's Member States' funds. These materials provide a more tailored account of the development sector, as they collect specific insights into the reality of practices on the ground.

To fulfil this aim, seven interviews with experts from five organisations were conducted between March and April 2022; two were carried out in person in Copenhagen, while all the others were arranged using online meeting tools, more specifically Zoom and Teams. The first expert who was interviewed previously worked in Central America for the Italo-Latin American International Organisation (IILA), an intergovernmental organisation based in Rome. IILA was in charge of implementing the social policy area of EUROsociAL, a EU-funded programme which aimed to foster peer-to-peer learning between counterpart institutions based in the EU and Latin America.<sup>63</sup> Two other experts instead work for The Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY), an NGO based in Copenhagen which operates in Guatemala and Honduras in terms of prevention of urban violence.<sup>64</sup> There DIGNITY promotes intersectoral dialogue and capacity-building activities. Then two experts from the Research Centre for the Violence Prevention in Central America (CIPREVICA), DIGNITY's partner NGO based in Guatemala, were interviewed. CIPREVICA applies an integral and intersectoral approach to violence prevention, starting from scientific research.<sup>65</sup> Lastly, two experts from Swedish NGOs agreed to take part in this study. The first works for the Swedish Development Partner (IM), an organisation which operates in Central America to prevent violence, foster political participation and economic empowerment of women and

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<sup>63</sup> EUROsociAL, "History," accessed May 15, 2022, <https://eurosoci.al.eu/en/history/>.

<sup>64</sup> DIGNITY, "International Programmes," accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.dignity.dk/en/international-programmes/>.

<sup>65</sup> CIPREVICA, "Quiénes Somos," accessed May 15, 2022, <http://ciprevica.org/quienes-somos/>.

vulnerable groups, and promote capacity-building.<sup>66</sup> The last expert instead works for the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (SweFOR), an organisation which is active in Guatemala with the mandate to promote peace and protect human rights defenders.<sup>67</sup>

All interviews followed the same topic guide, which was only slightly re-adapted based on whether the person interviewed was a European citizen working with Central American development actors, or a Central American citizen working with European development actors. All interviews were conducted in English, apart from three which were respectively conducted in Spanish and Italian, as the participants felt more comfortable articulating their experience in their native language. Nevertheless, the language aspect has not proven to be a limitation when proceeding with the analysis, due to the researcher's knowledge of both languages. In addition, since interviews have been used to grasp the overall sociocultural practice, but have not been subjected to the linguistic-oriented part of critical discourse analysis, the precision of the language has not been the most focal point. At the same time, the fact that all interviewees had the choice of expressing their opinions in their preferred language has surely benefitted a more informed understanding of the overall context to be analysed.

In terms of research ethics, all interviewees who participated in this study were asked to sign an informed consent form. This document clearly stated the terms of engagement and how interviewees' statements would be collected, stored and used for research purposes. Moreover, all participants had the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time, in addition to leaving the interview or refraining from answering questions. All interviews were recorded for transcription purposes, and interviewees were communicated which of their statements would appear in the final thesis, so they could decide to retract them. Furthermore, any personal data that could identify the experts has been concealed to uphold the anonymity agreement, and the involved participants are merely referred by the organisation they represent.

In terms of difficulties encountered when collecting interviews' data, the major aspects were related to finding and getting hold of experts who had direct experiences of working within EU-sponsored programmes in Central America. Nevertheless, one expert who worked for EUROsociAL in Central America agreed to participate in the interviews. It has instead been

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<sup>66</sup> IM, "Central America," accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.imsweden.org/en/where-we-are/central-america/>.

<sup>67</sup> SweFOR, "About Us," accessed May 15, 2022, <https://swefor.org/about-us/>.



easier to receive answers from European experts from NGOs who received funds for development cooperation from the EU's Member States, more specifically Sweden and Denmark. In order to broaden the perspectives included in this work by transcending a Eurocentric sphere, experts from Central American NGOs have been contacted, based on their partnerships with European NGOs. At first, this has proven to be slightly more complicated, but in the end two voices have been successfully included. Overall, connections with experts also triggered a positive snowballing effect, where participants proposed colleagues who would be suitable to participate in the interview process. During the interview process, minor differences have been noticed between online and in-person interviews, since the latter felt more natural as face-to-face meetings allow to more easily capture non-verbal body language. Nevertheless, given time restraints and geographical distance, videoconferencing tools have proven to be a valid alternative to meeting in person. Overall, there are no significant nor concerning variations in the data collected for the purposes of this thesis.

### 3.2. *Critical Discourse Analysis*

#### 3.2.1. *Explanation of the Method*

Analysing discourse is a central theoretical and methodological approach in social sciences and humanities, covering a very relevant role also in the sub-field of European Studies. The concept of discourse and discourse analysis have highly been debated and reinterpreted by different schools of thought, resulting in a complex variety of interdisciplinary approaches with different philosophical, theoretical, and methodological premises. Proposing a preliminary definition of discourse can thus be of help: discourse can be intended as a domain of language use, referring to particular patterns of talking, writing and thinking about the world, involving certain ideological assumptions.<sup>68</sup> This vision stems from the structuralist and post structuralist view of language as an access to reality, a social practice for attributing meanings to concrete phenomena. In this sense, language is seen as not only communicating information about the pre-existing physical world, but also as shaping the social world by creating new interacting systems of representations.<sup>69</sup> Since these patterns

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<sup>68</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1980), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips (eds.), *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications LTD, 2002), 8-10.

can be maintained or transformed by discursive practices, it is important to analyse the contexts in which language is used.

The methodology applied in this thesis adheres to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as presented by Norman Fairclough in his book *Language and Power* (1989). In general, CDA is thought to be a more encompassing and interdisciplinary approach, as it goes beyond the language-oriented analysis, by further delving into the relations between discourse and power.<sup>70</sup> There exist several approaches to CDA, which nevertheless revolve around some common features. Indeed, they all view discourse as one dimension constituting the social world along with non-discursive logics, such as economic and institutional aspects, that should be studied according to different tools.<sup>71</sup> As also understood in this thesis, discourse is then further defined as contributing to shaping reality, while at the same time being constituted by the dialectical interaction with the other social dimensions. Texts hence cannot be analysed in isolation, but can only be understood in relation to other texts or in their social context.<sup>72</sup> In addition, CDA approaches involve an empirical study of language use, in the form of textual analysis. Lastly, critical discourse analysts are of the opinion that discursive practices reproduce unequal power relations, and, via their critiques of these ideological underpinnings, they thus commit to social change.<sup>73</sup> More practically, this signifies that more egalitarian and liberal discourses are promoted, by also aiming at making people more aware of the discursive practices in which they more or less actively partake.<sup>74</sup>

According to Fairclough, “CDA combines critique of discourse and explanation of how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality, as a basis for action to change that existing reality in particular respects”.<sup>75</sup> This is a critical realist approach, as it recognises both the existence of a natural and social world, where only the latter is socially constructed via different human representations of meaning.<sup>76</sup> Based on this, the analysis of this thesis, starting with a critique of the development partnerships discourse, then sets to explore the existing social reality behind this field, in terms of power relations. Such an undertaking thus calls for intersecting degrees of analysis, ranging from a concrete policy

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<sup>70</sup> Amandine Crespy, “Analysing European Discourses” in *Research Methods in European Union Studies*, eds. Kennet Lynggaard, Ian Manners, and Karl Löfgren (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 109.

<sup>71</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 19-20.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-64.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>75</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), 6.

<sup>76</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995), 4-5.

text to the understanding of the wider discourse and social practice, also pursued with the help of expert interviews. In this regard, Fairclough conceptualised the dimensions of discourse as three stages in CDA, namely the description, the interpretation and the explanation.<sup>77</sup> In this sense, the first degree of analysis revolves around the formal linguistic features of the collected texts. The interpretation will then move to explore the discourse practice, that is, the production and consumption of the text. The explanation, the last level of analysis, engages with the social context, in order to understand how implications stemming from this framework relate to these investigated materials.

### 3.2.2. *Application of the Method*

The application of Fairclough's three-levelled CDA allowed me to define three main stages of analysis, gradually working from texts to discourses and sociocultural practices. All documents were coded via the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12. Starting with the textual analysis of the *Joint Communication*, I looked for vocabulary and verbal patterns which formed my first lens of understanding. In this phase, the description, I analysed the experiential, relational and expressional value of words, metaphors, sentences, and verbs.<sup>78</sup> This undertaking was complemented by intertextual relations with the other EU documents included in this research.

The second level of analysis, called interpretation, contextualises and operationalises the textual findings, by exploring the larger discursive practices in which they are embedded. For this reason, it is important to look at how the text is produced and consumed, in addition to its situational and intertextual relations.<sup>79</sup> For this reason, in my discussion, I firstly identified the producer and receiver, to then look at the historical happenings in Latin America in 2019, when the *Joint Communication* was published. I have then interpreted the *Joint Communication*, *Consensus* and *Multiannual Indicative Programme* by analysing which discourse of partnerships of equals and agency they advance.

The last stage, the explanation, has the aim of showing how discourses are part of a wider social practice, by investigating how discourses and social structures can mutually influence

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<sup>77</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 58.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 109-139.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 140-162.

each other.<sup>80</sup> This step unveils power relations, by considering social determinants, ideologies and their effects.

One of the main flaws of CDA is usually identified in the difficulty of drawing a theoretical distinction between discursive and non-discursive elements of social reality.<sup>81</sup> This can be solved by seeing it as an analytical division, rather than an empirical one, without imposing an essentialist demarcation<sup>82</sup>. In relation to this thesis, the advantages brought by CDA outweigh the aforementioned critics. It is therefore deemed to be a suitable methodological approach, as it combines a linguistic and social theory to examine power relations involved in discourse.

### 3.3. *Expert Interviews*

#### 3.3.1. *Explanation of the Method*

Limiting the discussion to policy documents fails in providing a more hands-on insight into the complex dynamics of EU partnerships in Central America. Indeed, it is possible to trace existing discourses via different texts, but such undertaking lacks more practical observations about the development sector and the sociocultural sphere which can instead be retrieved from the primary experiences of professionals on the ground. For this reason, seven experts from NGOs and intergovernmental organisations, both European and Central American ones, were interviewed during the data collection phase of this thesis, following a semi-structured interview method. This combination of data collection methods has been embarked upon with the aim of gathering a wider pool of reflections and field-specific expertise, thus enabling a more encompassing analysis.

Interviewing is a knowledge-producing social practice “[...] as old as the human race”, as Bogardus defines it.<sup>83</sup> In this thesis, a qualitative interview is interpreted according to Kvale and Brinkmann’s explanation, thus “[...] as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena”.<sup>84</sup> In other words, this method serves a goal set by the researcher and

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<sup>80</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 163-166.

<sup>81</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 89.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> Cit. in Svend Brinkmann, “Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 279.

<sup>84</sup> Cit. in Brinkmann, “Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing,” 286-287.

seek accounts on how interviewees experience real-life phenomena, which are then furthered interpreted to build nets of meaning. In today's contemporary qualitative research, semi-structured interviews appear to be the most widespread approach, as dialogues have the inherent potential of allowing more discussion on topics deemed relevant by the researcher.<sup>85</sup> For the knowledge-production purposes of this thesis, the increased flexibility and dialogical value characterising semi-structured interviews proved to be more instrumental than the standardised surveys typical of structured interviews or the unbound pre-set of unstructured interviews. The topic guide that constituted the backbone of the interviews present in this project was indeed formed by open questions, thus providing participants with more room to unfold their own reflections and raise concerns within a specific framework. All the interviews were carried out individually, and no group interviews were thus involved. This modality offered a couple of advantages, such as allowing for more trust and confidentiality, along with making it easier to redirect the conversation when needed, to achieve the research interests.<sup>86</sup>

When defining expert interviews, these are considered as an independent procedure within the canon of qualitative interviews.<sup>87</sup> Due to the specific epistemological nature of this approach, the target social group is formed by experts, seen as agents with technical, process and interpretative knowledge in their own professional area.<sup>88</sup> In this thesis, experts are regarded as employees from the mid- and lower hierarchy of organisations whose specific project activities and know-how are deemed relevant for further investigations of the field of development partnerships in Central America. This methodological concept thus entails a relational and constructivist aspect, as the selection of respondents inevitably depends on the research design defined by the interviewer.<sup>89</sup> In addition, the threefold nature of experts as participants in a research project must not be overlooked. Indeed, they can voice their own opinions as individuals, but can also bring forward the position of an organisation as its representatives, or as strategists, by instrumentally spreading specific sets of information. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration the role of the interviewer, who does

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<sup>85</sup> Brinkmann, "Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing," 286.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>87</sup> Michaela Pfadenhauer, "At Eye Level: The Expert Interview – a Talk between Expert and Quasi-expert," in *Interviewing Experts*, eds. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 81.

<sup>88</sup> Alexander Bogner and Wolfgang Menz, "The Theory-Generating Expert Interview: Epistemological Interest, Forms of Knowledge, Interaction," in *Interviewing Experts*, eds. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 54.

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem.

not merely interact as a neutral subject, but also as an actor with a specific knowledge background and research interests.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, data are also variables produced by the interaction among all interview's participants. For this reason, it is pivotal that the researcher is thoroughly prepared on the expert's context, while also being clear about the epistemological premises of the project.<sup>91</sup>

### 3.3.2. *Application of the Method*

To ease the analysis process, all interviews were transcribed, by adding punctuation and deleting repetitions, or words such as 'you know,' 'um,' and 'like'. At the same time, the excerpts from interviews conducted in Italian and Spanish were translated into English, but this did not impact the overall quality of the findings.

The interviews were approached via qualitative data analysis, meaning that their linguistic materials were classified and interpreted to formulate statements about their meanings<sup>92</sup>. The analysis of the transcripts combined a first rough overview of the materials with a more detailed elaboration of categories that could be found across the interviews. The former undertaking allowed to reduce the data sets in order to interpret the phenomena of interest more efficiently. This first selection was theoretically driven, as it was mainly guided by the concepts introduced in Chapter 2 and the research objectives. In this sense, it can be affirmed that "Researchers working from a decolonizing perspective pay deliberate attention to how the design, conduct, and use of interviews contribute to social justice agendas".<sup>93</sup> As a second step, findings were gathered by making connections among data, codes, and categories. These results were interpreted with the support of quotations from the transcripts.

In my thesis, following this process, I will explain how the partnerships discourse might be reformed in a more equal way, by taking into account the results from the interviews. The experts' knowledge allows for reflections on the themes of partnerships and agency, while providing first-hand insights into the institutional and social sphere.

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<sup>90</sup> Gabriele Abels and Maria Behrens, "Interviewing Experts in Political Science: A Reflection on Gender and Policy Effects Based on Secondary Analysis," in *Interviewing Experts*, eds. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 140-141.

<sup>91</sup> Bogner and Menz, "The Theory-Generating Expert Interview," 70-71.

<sup>92</sup> Uwe Flick, "Mapping the Field," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: SAGE Publications LTD, 2014), 5.

<sup>93</sup> Kathryn Roulston, "Analysing Interviews," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: SAGE Publications LTD, 2014), 298.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The following chapter sets out to present and discuss the research results collected during the analysis of EU documents and expert interviews. The first section consists of a text analysis of the *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces For a Common Future* (2019). This is conducted by following Fairclough's three steps of CDA and the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. The section starts by analysing the discursive practice in which the *Joint Communication* is embedded, by linking it to *The New European Consensus on Development: 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'* (2017) and *The Americas and the Caribbean - Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027* (2021). In this interpretation, I strongly focus on the theme of partnership of equals between the EU and Central America, and the concept of agency, to understand how they are articulated. This part of the chapter also explains the social context in which these discourses take shape and transform power relations. This first section closes with an in-depth analysis of the *Joint Communication*, by exploring its linguistic features.

The experts' remarks will be then used throughout the second part of the chapter to complement the top-down institutional approach with a practical bottom-up perspective, stemming from their experiences in development. In this section, the interviews are examined, by identifying and interpreting common categories found across the transcripts. The conclusion of the chapter will instead provide a synthesis and evaluation of the study's findings.

### 4.1. Text Analysis

#### 4.1.1. The EU's Development Discourse in Central America and its Social Context

This section will focus on the discursive practices of the EU regarding the partnerships and agency in international development programmes in Central America. This will be done by seeing how these discourses are defined, what practices they engender, and their shortcomings or problematics. In this process of interpretation of the textual findings, the situational and the intertextual context are central dimensions to capture the discursive practices.

From a situational perspective, the *Joint Communication* has been addressed from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Nevertheless, the framework envisioned by this written piece is mainly towards LAC, in the role of partners. Regarding subjects and relations behind the text production and consumption, the EU will hereafter be identified as the producer of the text, while the LAC countries are viewed as the receivers.

It is relevant to point out that the *Joint Communication* was published in April 2019. That year was marked by the Venezuelan presidential crisis, which from January 2019 exacerbated the downward spiral of socioeconomic crisis, political discontent and health care emergency. In this context, the EU's Member States, together with several Latin American countries, established the International Contact Group (ICG), to provide help in finding a peaceful and democratic way forward.<sup>94</sup> In the text, the ICG is taken as an example to foster political engagement between the EU and LAC, claiming that its effects are experienced beyond Venezuela.<sup>95</sup> The importance of increasing similar joined-up approaches is also stressed by the example of the Contadora Group, where stakeholders from both regions collaborated to promote peace and set the basis of the Esquipulas Peace Agreements in Central America in the 1980s.<sup>96</sup>

Based on 2019's turbulent upheavals, which also affected the rest of the LAC region, the *Joint Communication* thus inserts itself in an intense period of social, economic, and political struggles. Therefore, promoting democracy, peace, and security acquire a more significant and pressing role in this context. This document uses language in an instrumental way, which adheres to these broader institutional objectives. For this reason, the focus on how to reinforce the EU's political partnership with LAC is predominant. The need for this strategy is further advocated in light of evolving regional and global challenges.

The *Joint Communication* draws its background from a plethora of institutional documents, both at the EU and international levels. As mentioned in the text,

It aims to provide strategic direction for the EU's external action with LAC, in line with the principles set out in the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security

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<sup>94</sup> General Secretariat of the Council, "Venezuela: The Council's Response to the Crisis," last modified January 24, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/venezuela/>.

<sup>95</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces for a Common Future* (Strasbourg, 2019), 14.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*.



Policy, the European Consensus on Development, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the ‘Trade for All’ Communication and the negotiating directives for a partnership agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States.<sup>97</sup>

For the purposes of this intertextual analysis, *The New European Consensus on Development: ‘Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future’* (2017) and *The Americas and the Caribbean - Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027* (2021) will be considered to contextualise the EU discourse on development and how it will be implemented in Central America in the current programme phase. These two texts enrich the understanding of the *Joint Communication*, by looking into its policy background and by providing a closer perspective into its reproduction in Central America.

The *Consensus* constitutes the cornerstone of the EU’s development policy, and contributes to the EU’s overall actions in the framework of the 2030 Agenda. For this reason, the fact that partnership is one of the five key themes of the 2030 Agenda, along with people, planet, prosperity, and peace, is eloquent in stressing its relevance.<sup>98</sup> The momentum of this concept is also reinforced in the third chapter of the *Consensus*, titled *Partnership - The EU as a Force for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda*. An aspect which also recurs in the *Joint Communication* is the possibility for joint implementation, underlining the modalities in which shared objectives can be pursued. In the *Consensus*, this is described in points 77 and 78, where the latter states that “Joint implementation will be inclusive and open to all EU partners who agree and can contribute to a common vision, including Member States’ agencies and their development financial institutions, the private sector, civil society and academia”.<sup>99</sup> All this emphasis on shared interests seems to have more of a persuasive role by drawing analogies that could be advantageous in negotiations.

Another frequent element in the two texts is forging partnerships going beyond governments. As articulated by point 87 of the *Consensus*, “The EU and its Member States will expand partnerships with the private sector, civil society, including trade unions and employers’ organisations, multilateral and regional organisations, academia, diasporas and other

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<sup>97</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Joint Communication*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Council of the European Union, Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council, European Parliament and European Commission, *The New European Consensus on Development: ‘Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future’* (Brussels, 2017), 8.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

relevant stakeholders”.<sup>100</sup> In both texts, among these actors, the three stakeholders that appear to be more prominent are the private sector, civil society and cooperation in a multilateral framework.

When instead analysing the theme of agency, a mention can be found in point 95 in the *Consensus*, where innovative engagement with more advanced developing countries is envisioned, thus going beyond assistance and reflecting their capabilities.<sup>101</sup> These countries are seen as having an influential role within their regions, also as promoters of stability.<sup>102</sup> When talking of ‘the Least Developed Countries’, the attention seems to be placed on their needs and dependence on international public finance, rather than on elaborating on their resources and potential.<sup>103</sup> Overall, the focus continues to be on the EU and its Member States’ contributions, practices and understanding of development, instead of earnestly reflecting on how these actions and concepts might differ in other regions across the world. This also appears to be a pattern in the *Joint Communication*, where an active role is always ascribed to the EU and its Member States, or at maximum to these actors working together with LAC countries. The latter’s position, both in terms of government or civil society stakeholders, thus seems to be envisioned as an auxiliary role in the best case, but this still does not mirror the ownership of full agency. As also articulated in the theory chapter, developing countries tend to be dismissed as mere receivers of aid and globalised discourses, while their capacity to act, produce knowledge or channel different perspectives is overlooked.

The *Multiannual Indicative Programme* has instead the scope of contributing to the strategic objectives of the EU’s external action until 2027. To address the several challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it calls for international economic recovery, by defining a new green, digital, sustainable and inclusive framework.<sup>104</sup> On the social side, it instead endorses more democratic governance, security, cohesion and the need to fight inequalities. This document was issued after the *Joint Communication*, as it was published in 2021. This regional *Multiannual Indicative Programme* is thus instrumental in understanding how the

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<sup>100</sup> Council, *Consensus*, 43.

<sup>101</sup> Council, *Consensus*, 46.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>104</sup> European Commission, *The Americas and the Caribbean Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027* (Brussels, 2021), 4.

discourses of the *Joint Communication* have been further reproduced, thus unveiling another level of intertextuality.

When referring to the Central American sub-window, it can be noticed how the support for processes of regional integration is renewed, with the intent to pursue greater stability, security and socioeconomic growth in the area.<sup>105</sup> In this perspective, the Central American Integration System (SICA) could play a considerable role. The SICA is formed by eight countries situated at different levels of the income spectrum: El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are lower middle-income countries, while Belize, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Panama are upper middle-income countries.<sup>106</sup> Recognising the value of this regional dimension partially confers a role of partner and agent to Central American actors, but these fora mainly involve higher institutions such as countries' governments. Therefore, this generates a shortcoming in the variety of voices and sectors that could instead be represented. Moreover, the current scenario of Central America is threatened by political instability and corruption, in addition to climate change and the worsening of socioeconomic upheavals due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, SICA's potential for regional integration is weakened by these vulnerabilities. Another step towards acknowledging the exchange of regional technical expertise refers to the benefits of involving actors from different sectors. Nevertheless, once again, this then reverts to "[...] trigger in country policy dialogue at the highest levels", leaving unclear how different society segments could be involved in a more structured way.<sup>107</sup>

These examples show how, in the last five years, starting in 2017 with the *Consensus*, partnerships have been a critical theme in the EU's strategy towards achieving the Agenda 2030. More specifically, a focus on partnerships of equals and the possibility for joint implementation have intersected the three documents under analysis. At the same time, the concept of agency still appears to be loaded with a dominant Eurocentric value. Even if these texts propose ventures for achieving common interests, the EU's understanding and courses of action prevail. This top-down approach is mainly paired with collaboration with Central American governments and other national institutions. Other sectors, such as civil society and private stakeholders, are increasingly mentioned in the *Joint Communication* and *Multiannual Indicative Programme*. This can reveal the first steps towards rethinking and

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<sup>105</sup> European Commission, *Multiannual Indicative Programme*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

promoting inter-sectoral exchanges, even if, at the moment, it lacks a structured vision for how this dialogue can be implemented more effectively.

Discourses need to be contextualised as part of a social process. This is done by both displaying how discourses are shaped by social structures, intended as relations of power, and how they, in turn, affect those same structures.<sup>108</sup> This undertaking will be instrumental for the second research question, to explain how EU-Central American partnerships are affected by the discourse of the EU as an emerging post-colonial actor.

A first striking observation is that none of the three documents analysed in this chapter mentions the EU's colonial past in any form. The omission of this intrinsic aspect of European and Central American history disregards Europeans' responsibility for colonialism, but it also fails to acknowledge the implications that such a legacy can have in the development sector. This silence hampers the strength of the EU's efforts and impacts their overall perception and credibility. Even when more far-reaching reflections on the past could have been included, rhetorical catchphrases prevail, as in the first line of the *Joint Communication*, describing the EU and LAC as "[...] united by history and guided by many shared values".<sup>109</sup>

It appears that this discourse is shaped by a broader institutional process and power relations, that is to say, the EU's general unwillingness to debate its colonial past. In these terms, the lack of real introspection risks crystallising the EU's self-conception as a generous aid donor, while downplaying the neo-colonialist power plays that can re-emerge in development policies. This can signal an ideological connotation, similar to the debate on cultural imperialism in anthropology. In this case, it relates to the struggles that development and human rights discourses can cause if they are conducted as an "[...] imperialist extension of Western legal orders to the rest of the world".<sup>110</sup> This could have the normative effect of sustaining existing power relations, rather than a creative role in the real transformation of social practices.

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<sup>108</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 163.

<sup>109</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Joint Communication*, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Speed and Leyva Solano, "Global Discourses on the Local Terrain", 208.

#### 4.1.2. *Analysis of the Joint Communication*

The *Joint Communication* is an official document issued by the European Commission and the European External Action Service in April 2019. The European Parliament and the Council are called upon to renew the EU's political partnership with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Since this text is the most encompassing framework for partnerships between the two regions, it is also pivotal in relation to the sub-regional cooperation with Central America, the main subject of this study.

The *Joint Communication* is divided into four sections. The introduction explains the relevance of the partnership between the two regions and describes their long-term historical, economic and development cooperation. The second part of the communication, titled *Standing Up For Our Shared Values and Interests*, presents the four key partnership priorities: prosperity, democracy, resilience and effective global governance. I will mainly focus on the paragraphs on partnering for democracy and resilience, as they address issues of social cohesion of primary importance for Central America. The text continues with the quest to move from vision to action, referring to how to efficiently implement this framework. Lastly, the document concludes with a call to join forces for the future, by including citizens and envisioning a more comprehensive approach to LAC from the EU's Member States.

This document is an example of a policy text, meaning that the choice of words and the formulation of sentences are not casual, but serve the overarching purpose of advancing the EU's stance. Since the wording of this text is not neutral in its production, but instead reproduces a top-down institutional approach, the significance of language is not to be underestimated. This section of the chapter has thus the scope of analysing the linguistic features, such as vocabulary and grammar, which can convey power relations and ideological assumptions from the EU. This description stage is based on Fairclough's questions for text analysis.<sup>111</sup> The empirical data were identified via the process of qualitative coding, conducted via NVivo 12 and manually to better understand the text. This allowed a more comprehensive identification of keywords, their occurrence and their patterns of combination with other words.

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<sup>111</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 110-111.

Regarding vocabulary, it is interesting to look at the relational value of some selected words, focusing “[...] on how a text’s choice of wordings depends on, and helps create, social relationships between participants”.<sup>112</sup> In this text, this refers to how words can provide a cue to how the EU envisions partnerships with LAC countries. One of the first observations is the emphasis on the commonality of principles. A first example is that the words ‘values’, ‘priorities’ and ‘interests’, in the majority of the cases, are paired with adjectives such as ‘shared’ or ‘common’. This correlation reveals a significant meaning pattern, as it expresses the EU’s intention to link the sphere of principles and goals to both geographical areas. Another recurring term is ‘bi-regional dialogue’, which is repeatedly preceded by verbs such as ‘enhance’, ‘deepen’, ‘step-up’ and ‘intensify’, or the adjective ‘closer’. These mark the EU’s aim to tighten the relations between the two regions, by establishing more profound exchanges.

Along these lines, the theme of strength intersects the word ‘partnership’, which is described as ‘successful and long-standing’ when referring to the past connections between the EU and LAC, and ‘strategic’, ‘stronger and modernised’ for the future ones. It does not surprise that the term ‘cooperation’ is among the most recurrent nouns in the document, as it is used to communicate the idea of working together by pursuing mutual benefit. The adjective ‘sustainable’ is the most frequent when describing how to enact these partnerships. It refers to several spheres of bi-regional cooperation, such as its environmental, social and economic dimensions. This term appears to be more of a catchword than a well clarified and framed concept in this text.

When considering the expressional value of words, it is instead relevant to detect traces of the EU’s evaluation of the reality in which it operates as a development actor. These cues relate to whether words have a positive or negative connotation. The EU’s role in the LAC region is introduced in the first pages of the text. Here it is possible to notice how the EU’s actions are positively described by using adjectives in their superlative form or ordinal numerals, such as in the case of “The EU is the third largest trade partner of LAC [...]”, “The EU is the first investor in LAC [...]” or “The EU has been the largest provider of development cooperation to LAC [...]”.<sup>113</sup> In all three cases, the statements are promptly supported by mentioning the number of billions of EUR involved in economic transactions, investments or humanitarian aid. Hence, these sentences seem to transcend a mere positive

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<sup>112</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 116.

<sup>113</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Joint Communication*, 1-2.

evaluation of the EU's actions; instead, they appear to underline the EU's role in the region as one of primary importance.

This pattern is also visible when, on page 2, China is mentioned, saying that it “[...] is rivalling the EU as the second trading partner of Latin America”.<sup>114</sup> Here, the term ‘rivalling’ seems to advance a negative evaluation, going beyond what could be instead referred to as trade competition. This underlines an issue of ideological significance, where the EU is represented as a positive actor challenged by rival international players.

Another way which places the EU in a good light is by taking its internal mechanisms as an example. The word ‘model’ and its synonyms are most often related to the EU and never to the LAC region. Therefore, it is less clear how LAC countries can contribute to the alleged mutual knowledge exchange, apart from a brief mention towards the end of the document, where the idea of “[...] sharing of knowledge and expertise on issues of mutual interest, including public policy [...]” is advanced.<sup>115</sup> The interpretative and explanatory paragraphs of this chapter will analyse whether such actions go beyond a donor-recipient logic or if they remain policy rhetoric.

In the study of vocabulary features, metaphors are a compelling figure of speech to analyse, where words and sentences are not applied in their literal sense. The *Joint Communication*, as EU development policies at large, makes use of tropes, by channelling the attention and characterising the EU's actions. In the very first paragraph of the document, it can be read that the partnership between the EU and LAC has been “[...] a driver of change and an incubator for new ideas”.<sup>116</sup> This denotes a focus on innovation, thought to be fostered and led by this partnership. This role of guidance is then metaphorically conferred to civil society, as suggested by the title of Section 3.3.: *Our Societies in the Driving Seat*. This expression conveys the need for closer engagement among the EU and different local actors. Another figurative metaphor is that of ‘eradicating poverty’, an intertextual expression that has become a catchphrase of the EU development policy since it was placed at the core of the first *European Consensus of Development* (2005).

Grammatical features constitute the second dimension of text analysis, as, among others, the construction of sentences, the choice of verbs, the use of the active or passive form, or

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<sup>114</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Joint Communication*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 1.

nominalisations can give us insights into power relations. Starting by exploring the experiential values, it can be noticed how grammar aspects can code happenings or relationships in the world.<sup>117</sup> In the *Joint Communication*, the EU appears more frequently as subject (S) throughout the text, while LAC tends to have the role of object (O) and rarely of subject on its own. This adheres to the grammar process of actions according to Fairclough.<sup>118</sup> Actions are sentences with an SVO structure, meaning that the subject is followed by a verb and an object. They involve an agent and a patient, whereby the agent's actions have an impact on the patient. It can thus be of ideological interest to see how the EU is the predominant subject, while the LAC countries are considered subject only when paired in formulations such as "The EU and LAC" or "The EU-LAC partnership".

The text is rich in nominalisation, meaning that many processes are converted into nouns, rather than being explained more extensively in a sentence. This aspect contributes to the formality of the document, while also causing a loss of verbal presence. An example is that the term 'implementation' recurs thirty-one times in the text, three times more than verbal forms such as 'implement', 'implementing' and 'implemented'. Active sentences tend to prevail, as the focus on the EU's agency appears to be a well-established pattern. At the same time, the term 'not' only appears twice in the text, thus underlining an intent to explain what is happening or what should be done.

Relational values can instead be derived by modes of sentences, modality and pronouns<sup>119</sup>. In terms of modes, the *Joint Communication* is mainly formed by declarative sentences, where the verb follows the subject. Both questions and imperative clauses are instead absent. By using Fairclough's words, "In the case of a typical declarative, the subject position of the speaker/writer is that of a giver (of information), and the addressee's position is that of a receiver".<sup>120</sup> In this text, the voice of the EU institutions is the one advancing proposals for partnership, while the LAC countries are in a position of listener.

When analysing the relational modality of a text, we mainly look at the use and selection of modal auxiliary verbs. In this text, the prevailing modal verb is 'should', which can signal a recommendation, but also an obligation or expectation. In this document, it primarily outlines the course of action which needs to be followed to achieve the partnership goals.

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<sup>117</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 120.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 125-126.



The auxiliary ‘can’ is present, but to a lesser extent. It mainly shows which possibilities can be reached via the partnership, thus specifically referring to future outcomes. Even if the verb ‘must’ is never used, the authority and power relations are implicit in the constant repetition of ‘should’, thus turning the relational modality into a matter of ideological interest.

The text also includes several reiterations of the personal adjective ‘our’. It refers to the values shared by the EU and LAC, thus conveying a sense of commonality. This attempt is even more recurrent in other EU texts that form this *Joint Communication*’s institutional frame, such as the *Consensus*. This aspect signals again the intertextuality of this policy, which thus feeds on rhetorical patterns that have long permeated the EU’s discourse on development.

Based on this text analysis, two central themes can be identified: partnerships of equals and the focus on the EU’s agency, rather than on LAC’s initiatives. These will be discussed in the following paragraphs, in terms of how they answer the first two research questions:

- 1) Which discourse is promoted by the EU’s development cooperation in Central America?
- 2) How does this discourse influence EU-Central American partnerships?

The reflections on the discursive and text practice formulated in the previous sections answer the first research question of this study. It can be seen how the EU’s development cooperation in Central America is centred around the discourse of partnership of equals. Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy between this vision and how it is enacted, since agency is asymmetrically ascribed to the EU. By applying a post-colonial lens, we can see how much the EU has achieved in terms of provincialisation, engagement and reconstruction (See Chapter 2).

When it comes to the first step, that of acknowledging that European experiences and interests are not universal, there are some attempts towards proposing tailor-made solutions. For instance, point 91 of the *Consensus* states that “Development cooperation will continue to be country- or region-specific, based on partners’ own needs, strategies, priorities and resources. The EU and its Member States will cooperate with developing countries in an increasingly diversified and tailored manner”<sup>121</sup>. This concept is also included in the way the *Joint Communication* envisions its operative framework and response to political

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<sup>121</sup> Council, *Consensus*, 44.

priorities.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, the step of engagement in non-European perceptions is relatively shallow. Indeed, the plural cultural resources provided by Central America do not seem to be adequately nor sufficiently taken on board by the EU. This results in a lessened dialogical value between the two regions, also to the detriment of the joint fight against global challenges. Neglecting this chance for mutual learning leaves many Eurocentric legacies unquestioned and partially jeopardises the positive aspects of the EU's contribution. Lastly, the reconstruction phase should entail the identification of the Eurocentric pitfalls in EU Policies, and how they can influence power relations. This endeavour is one of the guiding ideas of this thesis, but, as the engagement step, it is not that evident at the EU level.

It can thus be concluded that the EU is not advancing a discourse proper of a full post-colonial actor. Indeed, even if there is a stronger focus on pursuing partnerships where the EU and Central America can be positioned on an equal footing, the steps of engagement and reconstruction are yet to be achieved. For this reason, we can instead frame this discourse as that of an emerging post-colonial actor, which needs to pay genuine attention to the more covert legacies of its colonial past, and avoid their reproduction in development approaches. As stated by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis, the final scope is "[...] to eschew neocolonial habits which demand that others converge with European practices without giving up the EU project of empowering its Others (within and beyond) via democratisation, rule of law, and supporting the rights of the vulnerable".<sup>123</sup>

Answering the second research question, it appears how the partnerships between the two regions can be negatively affected by the discourse of the EU as an emerging, but not a fully-fledged post-colonial actor. More specifically, insufficient awareness, transparency and proactive dialogue about the mistakes from the past and their current weight can result in the lack of real mutual learning. In this sense, international development can instead be trapped in a neo-colonial donor-recipient relation, where the cooperation continues to foster asymmetries rather than the true potential of each actor. As a result, it is not to be excluded that the EU's values and 'best practices' can risk being imposed, by eventually doing more harm than good.

The sociocultural sphere of Central America is undoubtedly complex, due to a long history of institutional, economic and social instability. For this reason, the context is still marked

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<sup>122</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Joint Communication*, 14.

<sup>123</sup> Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, "A Post-Colonial Approach to EU External Action," 12.

by wounds, both caused by internal and external factors, ranging from the horrors of prolonged civil wars and forced migration, to the legacies of colonial hierarchies and the current industrial exploitation of the global market. This stresses the need to rethink the EU's actions, so they do not constitute another impediment to the representation of Central American voices, but rather a meaningful platform where to amplify them. Due to being immersed in such a difficult reality, Central American actors offer an intrinsic pool of place-based knowledge, an essential value which should be held in high regard to adjust development programmes in the region. This last argument will be elaborated further in the rest of this chapter, to explore how a transformation of discourse could draw closer to a more egalitarian development discourse.

#### 4.2. *Categorical Analysis of Interviews*

To complement the precedent Critical Discourse Analysis, the results from the interviews with experts are used to provide a paramount reflection on international development, along with a more extensive understanding of the institutional and social context. They will also contribute to answering the last research inquiry, as they will provide insights into how the EU's development discourse can be reformed in a more equal way.

As explained in the Methodology Chapter, this thesis is also supported by seven semi-structured interviews with experts from NGOs and intergovernmental organisations. The common denominator has been that all participants have years of experience working with development cooperation between the EU and Central America. This bottom-up perspective is an added value to counterbalance the EU's discourse so far analysed. By having a closer insight into the complex social dynamics behind the EU's partnerships in Central America, new ways forward can be formulated, based on the field-specific knowledge of professionals on the ground. This also allows critical theoretical assumptions of this thesis, such as the agential approach, to be enacted as an integral part of the research practice.

Based on a topic guide of eleven questions, the interviews have revolved around three main areas. As the first goal, partnerships between the experts' organisation and counterparts from the other geographical area have been explored, including practices, experiences and changes over time. Then experts have been asked how to build partnerships of equals, in addition to the values and challenges they currently experience. The last part of each

interview has instead zoomed on the European Union as a development actor in Central America regarding perceptions, impacts, and wished changes.

This latter part of the discussion starts by analysing how the participants interpret the EU's actions. A first overarching observation has been that the EU is reducing its presence as a development actor in Central America, due to an increased focus on its neighbouring countries in Europe and Africa.<sup>124</sup> This relocation of efforts is also affecting the funding of many European NGOs, aspects that are pressuring them to progressively leave the region. For this reason, one of the two Central American experts from CIPREVICA, the Research Centre for the Violence Prevention in Central America, noticed that "They [European NGOs] recommend us to get closer to North-American cooperation agencies, in the United States and Canada. Therefore, it has been a challenge for us as an organisation to maintain the existing European partnerships and find new ones".<sup>125</sup>

This changed vision is alarmingly impacting the work in the transitional justice sector, which the EU contributed highly to in terms of violence prevention and during the 1990s' peace agreements in Guatemala.<sup>126</sup> At the same time, this comes to the detriment of wider efforts towards global challenges, which, if left unresolved, would not only affect Central America, but would have international repercussions. These relate to migration crises, environmental damage, economic problems and political instability. It is thus felt that the EU could and should do more. This has especially been stressed by the two participants working for Swedish NGOs regarding the daily threats faced by human rights defenders. In this case, the expert from SweFOR states that "[...] it's been hard to have the EU to legitimise the work of human rights defenders", as the EU has rarely made public statements about this situation.<sup>127</sup> This is worrying seeing the global trends towards shrinking the democratic space. A recent exception has been a European Parliament's Resolution from 7 April 2022 which expressed concern for the situation of the rule of law and human rights in Guatemala.<sup>128</sup> Overall, retreating while similar social struggles are exacerbating would risk

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<sup>124</sup> Expert 1, The Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY). Interview by Author. Recording. Copenhagen, March 23, 2022. / Expert 1, Research Centre for the Violence Prevention in Central America (CIPREVICA). Interview by Author. Recording. Online Interview, April 5, 2022. / Expert 2, Research Centre for the Violence Prevention in Central America (CIPREVICA). Interview by Author. Recording. Online Interview, April 20, 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Translation from Spanish to English of the Interview with Expert 1, CIPREVICA.

<sup>126</sup> Expert 2, CIPREVICA.

<sup>127</sup> Expert, Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (SweFOR). Interview by Author. Recording. Online Interview, April 5, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> European Parliament, *The Situation of the Rule of Law and Human Rights in the Republic of Guatemala* (Strasbourg, 7 April 2022).

thwarting previous achievements, while leaving partners to confront an even less promising future. This weak response and positioning by the EU thus appear to alarm both Central American and European experts.

In this context, national governments from the EU's Member States and their related embassies in Central America seem to acquire a more favourable role. For instance, the Swedish Development Agencies in El Salvador, but especially in Guatemala, experience this. The expert from IM describes their relations with these words:

We collaborate, we do our politically strategic actions together, and we also have regular meetings with the Swedish Embassy members. There is good communication, and there's the interest. There are very few political advocacy public pronouncements from the Embassy, but it happens. They are very interested, well-informed; they talk directly with local organised civil society organisations. They even invest and support financially some of these organisations.<sup>129</sup>

The EU-LAT Advocacy Network pursued a similar joint approach to communicate with institutions, connecting European Development Agencies working with and in Latin America. Both IM and SweFOR are members, and they see benefits in that this platform amplifies their political advocacy work. Indeed, thanks to the colleagues based in Brussels and in the EU at large, they have more chances to understand its institutional functioning, and influence Members of the European Parliament and other EU's representatives.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, the fact that European NGOs have to group to make their voices heard is not a promising sign of sufficient attention from the higher EU ranks, including the Exterior Service of the European Union.

Both Central American and European experts identified an issue in the high competition and low flexibility characterising applications for the EU's development funds. For this reason, one of the interviewees observes a preference for funds from the Danish government, as they allow for more adaptability.<sup>131</sup> According to one of the two DIGNITY's experts,

This is where they [the EU] could learn something. They could learn about flexibility, adaptability within the same budget. If you want to go somewhere, there could be

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<sup>129</sup> Expert, Swedish Development Partner (IM). Interview by author. Recording. Online Interview, March 23, 2022.

<sup>130</sup> Expert, SweFOR. / Expert, IM.

<sup>131</sup> Expert 1, DIGNITY.

five different paths to go there, and the path that you decided three years before is not necessarily the best the one that is the best when you start working.<sup>132</sup>

As reflected upon by both Central American experts, this EU's attitude to impose strict requirements and deadlines can be linked to low knowledge of the local conditions: "Someone from Europe cannot tell the reality of Guatemala, of Latin America as they are not living here, they are very distant".<sup>133</sup> The other expert from CIPREVICA mainly notices the imposition of external practices when carrying out research activities, as the vision of European NGOs can clash with the local methodology.<sup>134</sup> The vast and increasing number of Central American NGOs accounts for the high level of competition, in addition to the fact that even European NGOs, which saw a budget reduction, are now applying from the same EU funds. Nevertheless, the winners of the funds tend to be very few, and in this demanding selection process, European NGOs with bigger capacity, endorsement and credibility are strong competitors.<sup>135</sup>

Several experts have also shown concern since the EU is giving funds to Central American governments, due to the elevated levels of state corruption. As stated by the IM expert, even if some national institutions have good programmes, there is a high risk of perpetuating corrupt practices of governments rather than pursuing the well-being of the population.<sup>136</sup> This has also represented a challenge within EUROsociAL, a programme funded by the EU Commission to foster public policy on gender equality, democratic governance and social questions. The expert from IILA indeed points out that countries with weaker institutions also have weaker social, political and democratic progress.<sup>137</sup> In addition to not fully benefitting from the potential of EUROsociAL, these countries can also have wavering political will, which can hinder the policy outcomes or obstruct the change process.<sup>138</sup> Overall, it appears that "[...] these funds could have more impact if they were directed towards organisations of the civil society (ONGs) rather than to local or central governments".<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Expert 2, The Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY). Interview by Author. Recording. Copenhagen, March 23, 2022.

<sup>133</sup> Translation from Spanish to English of the Interview with Expert 2, CIPREVICA.

<sup>134</sup> Expert 1, CIPREVICA.

<sup>135</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>136</sup> Expert, IM.

<sup>137</sup> Expert, Italo-Latin American International Organisation (IILA). Interview by Author. Recording. Online Interview, March 22, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>139</sup> Translation from Spanish to English of the Interview with Expert 1, CIPREVICA.

However, it is important not to neglect the achievements that the EU has contributed to during its decade-long presence in Central America. Starting from the negotiations of Peace Agreements for the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, the EU has been pivotal in providing safe spaces for dialogue between the opposing factions. This role was maintained after the war, when the EU supported the pursuit of transitional justice, human rights, peace culture and economic development. According to one of CIPREVICA's experts, "[...] with Europe there has been trust, but also sustainability over time", as the axes of intervention are seen as more sound, global and responsive to the local needs.<sup>140</sup> This support, beyond financial assistance, has also helped human rights defenders not to feel alone in their fights.<sup>141</sup>

Regarding how to build partnerships of equals, the experts' answers can be summarised by four main themes: respect, transparency, dialogue and mutual learning, and change of mindsets. Partnerships should be based on genuine mutual respect, which should not be rhetorical, but should be demonstrated by attitudes and actions. As defined by one of the Central American experts, there are three main categories of partners: "[...] those who respect; those who do not respect, but do not show it too much; and those who do not show any kind of respect".<sup>142</sup> This behaviour appears to be necessary with every stakeholder, including dialogues with institutions.

Having clarity and transparency is instead regarded as an essential step from the beginning of a partnership. If clear rules are agreed early on, then both parties can work towards the achievement of shared results, and know what is expected.<sup>143</sup> In this sense, there should also be symmetry in how partners openly exchange information. As stated by one of DIGNITY's experts, "Sharing information is sharing power, and if you want to create a good partnership, you need to create conditions for good relationship and good dialogue".<sup>144</sup> If one partner starts withholding information, this not only hampers the flow of knowledge, but, most importantly, the indispensable feeling of trust.

Effective dialogue and communication need an equal contribution from both partners; otherwise, the premises of an equal partnership are undermined. Conditions should be created, so that both partners can honestly express their successes and failures, without

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<sup>140</sup> Translation from Spanish to English of the Interview with Expert 2, CIPREVICA

<sup>141</sup> Expert 2, CIPREVICA.

<sup>142</sup> Translation from Spanish to English of the Interview with Expert 2, CIPREVICA.

<sup>143</sup> Expert 1, CIPREVICA.

<sup>144</sup> Expert 2, DIGNITY

hiding their concerns for fear of repercussions. In this sense, “The important part is to create this curiosity to try out things; try out, fail, make it better”.<sup>145</sup> It is via these efforts that partners can enter a process of shared learning, which should be purely horizontal. This means that neither of the parts should impose their views, but should instead actively listen and cooperate with the partner.<sup>146</sup>

Some European experts have positively described their strategies to engage with partners in Central America. IILA, working with governments as main interlocutors, started its projects in EUROsociAL with a structured dialogue called Mesa País. By involving all the needed Central American institutions in a peer to peer exchange, they jointly identified priorities and necessities, to then be addressed by the technical support of European experts.<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, as the IILA’s expert observed, “[...] a limit of this dialogue is that it is often oriented in one direction, that is: Europe – Latin America. It rarely goes in the other direction, unlike how a dialogue should be”.<sup>148</sup> Referring instead to the experiences of experts working in the NGO sector, it appears how the participation of partners is more present. To achieve this, the time and human resources struggles of smaller Central American NGOs have been communicated and acknowledged, thus leading to more understanding and flexibility.<sup>149</sup> As also noted by one of DIGNITY’s experts,

Our role here in Denmark is being adaptable to the needs of the partners, while having the advisory role, thus moving forward with the programmes, but always together with the partners. We don’t sit with the truth here. We don’t have the local knowledge.<sup>150</sup>

This again underlines the importance of being aware of one’s strengths and shortcomings, and how they can respectively complement or be complemented by the partners’ know-how.

A keyword connected to partnerships of equals has been that of capacity-building. For instance, this is signalled by DIGNITY’s intersectoral approach to preventing urban violence. In cooperation with Central American partners, they invite stakeholders from different levels, including police, local institutions and civil society, to reflect upon a shared problem and find common solutions. Complex issues at the societal level cannot be solved

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<sup>145</sup> Expert 2, DIGNITY.

<sup>146</sup> Expert 2, CIPREVICA.

<sup>147</sup> Expert, IILA.

<sup>148</sup> Translation from Italian to English of the Interview with Expert, IILA.

<sup>149</sup> Expert, IM.

<sup>150</sup> Expert 1, DIGNITY.



by one single sector; in the words of one of DIGNITY's experts, "The system doesn't change if half of the system is not invited".<sup>151</sup> Intersectoral dialogue thus appears to be crucial to give more overarching answers to systemic struggles. At the same time, this allows to gather resources and knowledge that were already available to other local stakeholders, but by having joint reflections and more efficient results.

Working with institutional actors is not easy in countries where the trust in the state is low, as in Central America. For this reason, another relevant role can be played by South-South relations, where successful practices can be shared without always focusing on European examples.<sup>152</sup> As also observed by the expert from SweFOR, "You cannot work alone. You cannot work in silos".<sup>153</sup> A similar approach is followed by IM, where they speak of an 'ecosystem of partnerships', meaning that they build on each organisation's strengths to promote synergetic actions and learning. In this sense, they acquire the role of facilitator and catalyst. This statement well summarises their vision: "We try to see ourselves as a peer organisation and not so much as a donor. With that, we are hoping to advance one of our main principles, which is this decolonisation of Aid and Development".<sup>154</sup> This role is complemented by scaling up the influence of partners, so that they can then work with other organisations as capacity-builders by using their place-based knowledge and new methods. The encompassing idea behind these endeavours is about a mind-shifting change, both for European and for Central American NGOs. In this way, the notion of unidirectional training can be left behind, while a more inclusive idea of development can be advanced.

The results of the interviews with experts are instrumental to understand the importance of Central American agency and actual practices on the ground, thus relating to the third research question. Considering these practical visions on partnerships, it can indeed be deducted to which extent a discourse of partnerships of equals is present within NGOs. At the same time, the aspects to be questioned in the EU's current approach are still many, but the experiences of NGOs offer valuable options for increased equality. Overall, the EU should place more efforts into actively listening to place-based knowledge, in a similar manner to how European NGOs are doing. The engagement with non-European voices should also be based on more intersectoral approaches, to recognise the agency of all development stakeholders. Untapping this unused potential could pave the way for more

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<sup>151</sup> Expert 2, DIGNITY.

<sup>152</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>153</sup> Expert, SweFOR.

<sup>154</sup> Expert, IM.

equality and representation, while addressing systematic challenges in a more efficient and informed way. A more egalitarian development discourse might be forming if the focus shifts from material resources to more self-reflection, mutual recognition and the creation of sustainable conditions to achieve shared impact.

#### 4.3. *Evaluation of the Study*

To conclude this discussion chapter, it is relevant to critically evaluate the research objectives, chosen approach, and methods. The empirical data have succeeded in answering the three research questions, by lending themselves to the intersecting degrees of CDA analysis in terms of description, interpretation and explanation. At the same time, the interviews' results have overall confirmed the problematics identified in the analysis of EU's policy documents.

Nevertheless, there could still be room for improvement, as it would be interesting to see how partnerships are instead articulated from a Central American institutional perspective. This could have allowed for a comparative study of the EU's and SICA's visions, similar to how the interviews have included European and Central American voices. However, the SICA has not released a corresponding document to the *Joint Communication*, thus hindering the chances for an accurate comparison. CDA has proven to be a suitable methodological tool, as the analysis of power relations is an essential approach in the framework of development cooperation. This becomes even more salient between two regions where the former coloniser is now the donor.

Lastly, the two methods have successfully combined a bottom-up and top-down approach, respectively working on the EU's discourse to then give back practical insights from the reality of the development sector. The interviews' data have strived to represent both regions, to have a meaningful and balanced discussion. Due to the spatial limits of this thesis and the time factor, seven interviews were carried out. Collecting data via surveys could have reached a higher number of participants, thus providing more possibilities for generalising results. At the same time, closed written questions might have also limited the space of expression of each participant. Taking into consideration these reflections, the objectives, methodology and methods seem to have fulfilled their scope, even if there are ways for further improvement.

## 5. Conclusions

The first section of this concluding chapter presents the findings of this study, by clearly summarising the answers to the research questions. The second section formulates how the results can have implications within and outside academia, also in terms of the further application of its methods and inspiration for other relevant research questions.

### 5.1. *Essential Findings*

Within the renewed focus of Von Der Leyen's Commission on international partnerships, this thesis explored the role of language in portraying the current EU's interests in Central America. At the same time, this study was able to provide the opinions of experts from NGOs and intergovernmental organisations working in the region, by revealing the reality of development practices. As the hope was to achieve an increased understanding of the EU's role in development, the thesis engaged with different views stemming from the EU's external relations studies and post-development.

The research was conducted according to three overarching questions. The first inquiry sought to understand which discourse is promoted by the EU's development cooperation in Central America. The second investigated how this discourse influences EU-Central American partnerships. Lastly, the third set out to explain how the EU's development discourse can be reformed in a more equal way.

Firstly, by analysing the vocabulary and verbal features of the *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces For a Common Future* (2019), and its discursive context, it can be concluded that the EU's discourse conveys the nature of an emerging post-colonial actor. Applying Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis' post-colonial lens, it can be noticed how the EU is slowly shifting towards acknowledging that European experiences are not universal, and more tailor-made solutions are needed. Nevertheless, the steps towards active engagement with non-European perspectives and re-imagination of its policies are still to be undertaken. For this reason, the EU's development efforts are not free of power relations and legacies of its colonial past. This means that a real decentring of development from Eurocentric views is still distant.

Answering the second research question, the discourse of the EU as an emerging post-colonial actor can hinder the quality of development partnerships with Central America. In fact, insufficient engagement with local knowledge can compromise the process of mutual learning. On the contrary, this kind of development cooperation can risk prolonging power asymmetries, by still imposing European views. This one-sided perspective does not adequately take into account the importance of Central American agency and place-based knowledge, which would contribute to increasing the effectiveness of programmes.

Moving on to the last question, it is interesting to see if and how the EU's development discourse can be reformed to achieve partnerships of equals. It is evident that the EU's approach to development partnerships in Central America still includes many problematic elements. Even if some positive changes could be observed in the articulation of the *Joint Communication*, these still tend to be feeble. However, the results from the expert interviews are more promising, showing how actors involved in the actual implementation of development programmes can formulate and advance options for increased equality. In this sense, it will be interesting to see whether the EU will pay more attention to place-based knowledge and intersectoral approaches in future development policies. This could lead to the formulation of a more egalitarian development discourse, where more awareness and recognition of each side's agency can lead to more sustainable partnerships.

Overall, it can be concluded that the current actions of the EU as an emerging post-colonial actor are not sufficient to achieve equality in development partnerships with Central America. However, the strategies discovered by carrying out expert interviews signal the existence of alternatives where the question of equality plays a more central role.

## 5.2. *Future Implications*

The results obtained by this study can also be used outside academia, as they point towards experiences and practices which can have visible implications in the field of development. This research indeed underlines how the complexity of partnerships both lies in the formulations in policy texts and their actual implementation. Due to its scope and limits, this thesis has not set out to conduct a concrete policy analysis, but a systematic and empirical study of this topic could be even more relevant for extra-academic purposes.

The methodology of this thesis can be useful for academic studies with the intention of analysing an institutional framework, while not dismissing the voices of other sectors, in my

case those of NGOs and intergovernmental organisations. At the same time, the research results could be a departure point to analyse whether the EU will evolve as a development actor in the region, or if it will retrocede in relation to the three post-colonial steps that were used in this analysis. Anyway, the role of the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) would serve as an interesting angle to actually show if its makeover has had influential effects on its mandate, or if it remains as a façade move.

In future research on this subject, it could also be relevant to explore some questions that were not included in the framework of this study. While my focus was directed towards partnerships for social cohesion, other major issues affecting Central America could be highlighted. A topic very related to this is that of sexual and gender-based violence. In this sense, it could be interesting to analyse the theme of gender in the EU's development efforts in this area, and examine the role of the EU in promoting this value. Another example is that Central America is very vulnerable to climate change. For this reason, it could be significant to explore the EU's normative power in terms of climate policy or disaster management.

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# Appendix 1

## Topic Guide for DIGNITY, SweFOR and IM

### Questions - Semi-Structured Interview

1. How does your organisation collaborate with partners from Central America, both state and non-state ones? How would you describe this partnership?
2. What is your role in these collaborations?
3. Which are your main takeaways from working with sensible social issues, such as promoting gender equality?
4. How do you think funds' beneficiaries perceive your role and that of your organisation?
5. Has the organisation's vision of partnership changed with time? If yes, in what ways?
6. Based on your experience in the development sector, which do you think are the most important values of a partnership?
7. Which are instead the main challenges?
8. How do you think partnerships should be built in order to achieve equality among stakeholders?
9. What role do you think the EU has played in Central America in the last three-four decades?
10. From a practical point of view, how has your work been influenced by the dynamics of EU-Central American partnerships?
11. Which changes do you wish to see in future partnerships with Central America?

## **Topic Guide for IILA**

### Questions - Semi-Structured Interview

1. Come collabora la Sua organizzazione con partner dell’America Centrale, sia statali sia non-statali, nel contesto di EUROsociAL? Come descriverebbe queste partnership?
2. Quale è il Suo ruolo in queste collaborazioni?
3. Quali sono le maggiori lezioni che ha imparato da collaborazioni legate a tematiche sensibili come coesione sociale ed uguaglianza di genere?
4. Come pensa che il Suo ruolo e quello della Sua organizzazione siano percepiti dai beneficiari di EUROsociAL?
5. La visione delle partnership è cambiata nel corso del tempo all’interno della Sua organizzazione? Se sì, in quali modi?
6. In base alla Sua esperienza nel settore della cooperazione, quali pensa che siano i valori più importanti di una partnership?
7. Quali sono invece le maggiori difficoltà?
8. Come pensa che si dovrebbero costruire le partnership per raggiungere uguaglianza fra i diversi attori?
9. Quale ruolo ha svolto secondo Lei l’Unione Europea in America Centrale negli ultimi tre-quattro decenni?
10. Da un punto di vista pratico, il Suo lavoro come è stato influenzato da partnership fra Unione Europea ed America Centrale nell’ambito di EUROsociAL?
11. Quali cambiamenti vorrebbe vedere in future partnership fra Unione Europea ed America Centrale?

## **Topic Guide for CIPREVICA**

### Preguntas – Entrevista Semiestructurada

1. ¿Como trabaja su organización con socios de la Unión Europea, estatales y no estatales? ¿Como describiría estas alianzas?
2. ¿Cuál es su posición en estas alianzas?
3. ¿Cuáles son los mayores aprendizajes de trabajar con cuestiones sociales, como promover la igualdad de género?
4. ¿Cómo piensa que los donantes perciben su posición y la de su organización?
5. ¿Ha cambiado la visión de las alianzas de su organización con el paso del tiempo? Si sí, ¿Cómo?
6. ¿Cuáles piensa que son los valores más importantes de una alianza?
7. ¿Cuáles son las mayores dificultades?
8. ¿Como piensa que las alianzas tienen que ser construidas para alcanzar igualdad entre las partes interesadas?
9. ¿Qué papel considera que la EU ha desempeñado en Centroamérica en las últimas tres-cuatro décadas?
10. ¿Desde un punto de vista práctico, como ha sido influenciado su trabajo por las dinámicas de las alianzas entre EU – Centroamérica?
11. ¿Qué cambios espera ver en futuras alianzas de la UE en Centroamérica?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Participant Informed Consent Form**

**Name of the Study:** The partnerships discourse of the European Union Development Policy in Central America (Working title)

**Researcher:** Camilla Castelanelli

**Programme:** Master of Arts in European Studies, Lund University

This interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted according to the method of semi-structured interviews, thus meaning that the order of the questions is flexible and additional queries can be spontaneously added. The data will be used for the Master's Thesis within the course "European Studies: Master's (Two Years) Thesis - EUHR18".

#### **By signing this form, you confirm that:**

- You have been explained the purpose and nature of the study.
- You have been able to ask questions about the study, and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction.
- You consent voluntarily to participate in this study, and you understand you can withdraw from it at any time without having to justify it.
- You understand that taking part in this study involves participating in an interview which will be recorded and transcribed.
- You understand that during the interview you can say as much or as little as you want, you can refuse to answer questions, and you can stop the interview at any time without having to justify it.
- You understand that personal data that can identify you, such as your name, will be anonymised and treated confidentially, while your organisation can be named.
- You understand that extracts from the interview can be quoted and presented as findings in the final Master's Thesis. You will be sent your quotes selected to be part of the Thesis before its publication.

- You understand that the signed consent form, the recording and the transcript will be stored on a private computer only accessible to the researcher for the length of the Thesis process.

**Signature of Research Participant**

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

**Signature of Researcher**

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date



## **Formulario de Consentimiento Informado del Participante**

**Nombre del estudio:** El discurso de las alianzas de la Política de Desarrollo de la Unión Europea en Centroamérica (título provisional)

**Investigadora:** Camilla Castelanelli

**Programa:** Maestría en Estudios Europeos, Universidad de Lund, Suecia

Esta entrevista tendrá una duración aproximada de 60 minutos y se realizará según el método de entrevistas semiestructuradas, por lo que el orden de las preguntas es flexible y se pueden agregar preguntas adicionales de manera espontánea. Los datos se utilizarán para la tesis de maestría dentro del curso “European Studies: Master’s (Two Years) Thesis - EUHR18”.

### **Al firmar este documento, usted confirma que:**

- Se le ha explicado el propósito y la naturaleza del estudio.
- Ha podido hacer preguntas sobre el estudio y sus preguntas han sido respondidas a su entera satisfacción.
- Usted consiente voluntariamente en participar en este estudio, y entiende que puede retirarse del mismo en cualquier momento sin tener que justificarlo.
- Usted entiende que participar en este estudio implica participar en una entrevista que será grabada y transcrita.
- Usted comprende que durante la entrevista puede decir tanto o tan poco como quiera, puede negarse a responder preguntas y puede suspender la entrevista en cualquier momento sin tener que justificarlo.
- Usted comprende que los datos personales que pueden identificarle, como su nombre, serán anonimizados y tratados de forma confidencial, mientras que su organización puede ser nombrada.
- Entiende que se pueden citar extractos de la entrevista y presentarlos como hallazgos en la Tesis final de Maestría. Se le enviarán sus citas seleccionadas para formar parte de la Tesis antes de su publicación.
- Usted comprende que el formulario de consentimiento firmado, la grabación y la transcripción se archivarán en una computadora privada a la que solo tendrá acceso la investigadora durante el proceso de la Tesis.

**Firma del participante en la investigación**

_____	_____	_____
Nombre del Participante	Firma	Fecha

**Firma de la investigadora**

Creo que el participante está dando su consentimiento informado para participar en este estudio.

_____	_____	_____
Nombre de la Investigadora	Firma	Fecha