

EMPOWERMENT OR DEPENDENCY? A SOCIO-ANTHROPO-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NGO ADVOCACY AND THE DECOLONIAL STRUGGLE IN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

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Abstract: Africa's development trajectory is increasingly defined by the tension between structural vulnerabilities and the rising influence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) acting as sovereign intermediaries. This paper interrogates the "discursive architecture" of NGO activism, exploring how these entities leverage linguistic and cultural capital to negotiate the boundary between emancipatory empowerment and systemic dependency. Utilizing a systematic analysis of policy reports and advocacy literature (2015–2025) across the Anglophone-Francophone divide, the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis and Frame Analysis to decode the "translation" of global development icons. By tracing the trajectory of terms such as empowerment, capacity-building, and sustainability, the research reveals a process of semantic mutation. As these concepts transition from donor frameworks to local lifeworlds, they are frequently stripped of their radical potential, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations through a technocratic register. The findings uncover a "participation paradox": while NGOs ostensibly advocate for local agency, their reliance on exclusionary, "expert" language often enacts a form of symbolic violence. This re-positions community members as passive consumers of developmental truth rather than active political agents, inadvertently perpetuating neo-colonial power structures. By synthesizing socio-anthropo-linguistic insights with post-development theory, this study proposes a decolonial semiotics of engagement that prioritizes linguistic hospitality and interpretive sovereignty as essential foundations for a truly empowered African future.

Keywords: Activism, dependency, empowerment, equity, intertextual mapping, non-Governmental, organizations, policy advocacy, underdevelopment

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1. Introduction

The trajectories of African development are fundamentally tethered to historically contingent and structurally embedded challenges spanning the socio-cultural, geopolitical, and environmental spheres which manifest with distinct granularity across diverse regional and linguistic contexts. However, these material constraints do not operate in a vacuum; they are co-constitutive of "development" as a discursive project (Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 2010). Under this lens, phenomena such as endemic poverty, infrastructural deficits, and educational inequities are not merely empirical realities to be solved, but are "discursive objects" through which the African continent is constructed as a perpetual site for external intervention. As African nation-states pivot toward ambitious frameworks like Vision 2030 and Agenda 2063, it becomes imperative to interrogate the ontologies of these movements specifically, how developmental "problems" are named, framed, and governed within a contested knowledge economy (Bekkai & Benkechida, 2025).

In this multifaceted terrain, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as pivotal intermediaries, navigating the liminal spaces between state apparatuses, grassroots communities, and transnational donor networks. Applying a Foucauldian lens, these organizations can be conceptualized as "agents of governmentality" (Foucault, 1991). They serve as the conduits through which global developmental rationalities are transposed into localized action, subtly sculpting civic behavior through the strategic deployment of advocacy, technical expertise, and mandated "participation." While the definition of an NGO remains fluid, this study aligns with Edwards' (2009) conceptualization of these entities as non-profit collectives responding to community exigencies. Yet, post-development and decolonial scholars demand a more rigorous critique: such participatory claims often mask epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies. These hierarchies prioritize donor-driven agendas and highly professionalized vocabularies, often silencing the very voices they claim to amplify (Sondarjee, 2024; Mbembe, 2001).

For four decades, the developmental lexicon has celebrated NGOs for their ostensibly innovative, people-centered methodologies (Banks & Hulme, 2012). By augmenting state functions in critical sectors health, social protection, and agriculture they have undeniably expanded service accessibility (Robinson et al., 2024). Nevertheless, a critical paradox persists. Post-development critiques suggest that these interventions frequently lubricate a "development machine" that privileges technocratic, Western-centric knowledge over indigenous epistemologies (Escobar, 1995). Decolonial perspectives further illuminate the "linguistic imperialism" inherent in this work; the hegemony of English and French in policy arenas creates a barrier that devalues localized ways of knowing.

This research interrogates NGO activism not merely as a vehicle for service delivery, but as a discursive and political practice. Activism, in this sense, is the power to construct social reality defining what constitutes a "legitimate" problem and a "valid" solution. In doing so, NGOs curate specific subjectivities: the "vulnerable poor," the "empowered woman," or the "resilient community." Synthesizing Foucauldian discourse theory with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995), this paper investigates the subtle mechanics of power used by NGOs to frame agendas and translate global mandates into local realities, often through the strategic use of exclusionary "expert" language.

Despite their high visibility, the legitimacy and accountability of NGOs are increasingly contested. A widening chasm exists between these organizations and the populations they ostensibly represent, exacerbated by upward accountability to donors and an encroaching culture of professionalization (Banks & Hulme, 2012). From a decolonial standpoint, this distance is reinforced by the coloniality of knowledge, where advocacy

discourses privilege globalized vocabularies at the expense of grounded, vernacular meanings. Furthermore, the rise of multi-stakeholder governance and NGO-corporate partnerships threatens to "depoliticize" dissent, transforming radical activism into manageable, co-opted "stakeholder engagement" (Hoepner & Li, 2019; Mayer & Roche, 2021).

While the material outcomes of NGO work are well-documented, the linguistic and discursive transformation of development remains under-theorized. Specifically, the role of multilingual advocacy, translation as a site of power mediation, and the impact of donor-centric reporting metaphors remain largely obscured. To address this lacuna, this paper employs a socio-anthropo-linguistic and decolonial methodology (Itchuaqiyaaq & Matheson, 2021; Naidu et al., 2024). We posit that NGO discourse is inherently ambivalent: it possesses the potential to be transformative when it disrupts dominant narratives and centers local epistemologies, yet it risks reinforcing dependency when it replicates deficit-oriented, Eurocentric imagery. By interrogating these tensions, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the politics of knowledge production and the future of institutional legitimacy in Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this paper is grounded in the ontological premise that discourse serves as the primary scaffolding through which development is imagined, legitimized, and governed. Rather than viewing language as a neutral medium for information transfer, this research posits that discourse is a robust mechanism of power that actively constructs the social realities it purports to describe. At the core of this framework is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as articulated by Fairclough and Wodak, which defines discourse as a dialectical social practice that is both shaped by the social world and instrumental in shaping it. Within the NGO sector, discourses are not merely descriptive accounts of "*underdevelopment*"; they are generative acts that define what constitutes a "problem," legitimize specific forms of external intervention, and curate the identities of both "experts" and "beneficiaries." By applying CDA, this study unmasks the ways in which authority is asserted and governance is enacted across multiple scales from the grassroots to the transnational thereby revealing how linguistic choices can solidify or subvert institutional power.

To enrich this analysis, the paper integrates linguistic anthropology, which emphasizes the cultural, historical, and semiotic dimensions of language use. Language is here understood as social action a site where moral orders, regimes of belonging, and political identities are negotiated in real-time. In the African context, characterized by profound linguistic plurality and an enduring colonial shadow, NGO communication frequently defaults to exogenous or hegemonic languages, predominantly English and French. This linguistic preference is not a mere logistical convenience; it is a semiotic act that recreates asymmetries of epistemic power, often rendering indigenous modes of expression "illegible" to the formal development apparatus. Consequently, the discursive forms and culturally situated repertoires of development cannot exist independently of their linguistic manifestations; to speak of development in a colonial tongue is to inherently frame progress through a specific, often alien, cultural lens.

This framework is further sharpened by post-development and decolonial critiques, which conceptualize "development" as a historically contingent discourse born of colonial power relations. NGOs function within a global "development machine" that tends to universalize Western-centric notions of progress at the expense of local epistemologies. Crucially, linguistic hierarchies serve as the gatekeepers of this machine; as Blommaert suggests, the unequal distribution of linguistic resources ensures that certain registers (the

professionalized, technocratic language of the Global North) accrue institutional capital, while others are relegated to the margins. This study investigates how NGOs mediate these hierarchies, deciding whose knowledge is deemed "legitimate" and whose lived experience is "translated" into policy-relevant data. This process of translation is rarely a neutral mirroring of reality; it is an exercise in epistemic violence where local nuances are often sacrificed for the sake of donor legibility.

NGO activism is thus theorized as a liminal discursive practice situated between global development mandates and local systems of meaning-making. This study defines the socio-anthropo-linguistic approach as a tripartite integration of CDA, linguistic anthropology, and decolonial critique. Within this framework, NGOs act as discursive brokers through three primary mechanisms: framing, translation, and mediation. They define the boundaries of what is possible, transpose abstract global objectives into vernacular messages, and "package" community grievances into donor-friendly vocabularies. This is an inherently ambivalent process; while culturally attuned and participatory communication can facilitate collective agency, technocratic or externally imposed discourses risk depoliticizing local struggles and reproducing a cycle of dependency. Ultimately, this framework treats language not as a logistical hurdle but as the primary arena of political contest and ethical accountability. By examining how NGO discourse is localized, resisted, or reconfigured, this study determines whether NGO activism serves as a catalyst for transformative development or as a sophisticated tool for the reinstatement of historical hierarchies of power and knowledge.

3. Methodology

The methodological framework of this paper is designed to interrogate the textual and semiotic architectures of NGO activism within the divergent yet overlapping Anglophone and Francophone African landscapes. By treating policy documents, advocacy manifestos, and developmental reports not merely as administrative artifacts but as primary sites of knowledge production, this research situates NGOs as central protagonists in the formation of developmental understanding. The study employs a synthesized analytical toolkit comprising Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Frame Analysis, and Intertextual Mapping, anchored within a socio-anthropo-linguistic orientation to capture the fluid negotiation of power across linguistic boundaries.

Central to this inquiry is the application of Critical Discourse Analysis as a means to deconstruct how NGOs mobilize specific linguistic and cultural resources to navigate the complexities of policy advocacy and community engagement. This is complemented by Frame Analysis, which allows for an examination of how developmental "realities" are strategically packaged to resonate with specific audiences be they transnational donors or local grassroots collectives. Through Intertextual Mapping, the research traces the genealogy and migration of "buzzwords" such as empowerment, capacity-building, and sustainability as they travel from the high-altitude discourse of global financial institutions into the localized praxis of African NGOs. This mapping identifies the semantic shifts, dilutive mutations, or radical re-significations these terms undergo, revealing whether they serve to catalyze community agency or reinforce structural dependency.

The geographical and temporal scope of this review is purposively contextualized, with a specific focus on the East African corridor most notably Kenya where the intersection of English, Kiswahili, and diverse indigenous languages creates a vibrant, multilingual laboratory for discursive negotiation. This setting provides a unique vantage point to explore how linguistic choice informs the depth and authenticity of civic engagement. The longitudinal parameters of the study, spanning the two decades from 2005 to 2025, capture a critical epoch of transition: the evolution from the MDG-era technocracy to the SDG-era

focus on integrated sustainability. Rigorous inclusion criteria prioritize peer-reviewed scholarship and African-centered research, supplemented by "grey literature" from grassroots organizations to ensure the inclusion of subaltern perspectives often obscured in mainstream development literature. Throughout this process, reflexivity remains a foundational ethical commitment; the researcher continuously interrogates their own positionality and interpretive biases, acknowledging that the act of analysis is itself a discursive intervention.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 NGO Discursive Strategies and Linguistic Framing

The discursive architectures of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) serve as the primary scaffolding through which foundational development constructs, specifically empowerment, participation, and sustainability are ontologically defined and socially enacted. Within this framework, NGO texts are not merely neutral repositories of programmatic data; they function as sophisticated discursive practices that delineate the boundaries of local interpretation and agency. In both Anglophone and Francophone African contexts, a discernible "discursive migration" occurs, wherein neoliberal development terminology is transposed from global donor frameworks into the vernacular of local NGOs. However, these semiotic shifts are rarely benign. As these terms traverse scales, they undergo a process of semantic re-signification that can either catalyse genuine community autonomy or, conversely, entrench a pathology of dependency by privileging external metrics of progress over indigenous epistemologies.

A critical distinction must be made between International NGOs (INGOs) and local grassroots organizations (LNGOs) regarding their discursive agency. While INGOs often dictate the "linguistic gold standard" of development, local organizations frequently act as linguistic chameleons. To secure institutional survival, these local actors perform a complex "upward translation," sanitizing the messy, organic realities of community life into the rigid, technocratic "logframes" demanded by donor KPIs. This mediation process is an invisible form of linguistic labour; the field worker becomes a cultural broker who must translate a donor's abstract "indicators" into a language that resonates with a grandmother in a rural village, often losing the radical edge of local dissent in the process.

In the multilingual laboratory of Kenya, the friction between standardized development jargon and local linguistic realities is particularly acute. Delgado Luchner (2020) observes that the rhetoric of participatory development often operates on a fallacious assumption of linguistic homogeneity. When NGO practitioners categorize local beneficiaries as "insufficiently empowered" due to a lack of English proficiency, they engage in a form of linguistic gatekeeping where language skills become a proxy for agency. However, the contemporary landscape of 2025 reveals a more nuanced reality: the rise of "Global Englishes" and hybrid registers like Sheng challenges the binary between "colonial" and "indigenous" tongues. These hybridities represent a strategic appropriation of language, where youth-led NGOs use localized English not as a tool of subjection, but as a vibrant medium for self-expression and political mobilization.

Conversely, emergent practices among Kenyan grassroots organizations and the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) suggest a counter-hegemonic shift toward linguistic contextualization. By intentionally centring Kiswahili and other vernacular registers, these actors bypass the "translation gap" and re-embed empowerment within local moral orders. TAMWA's strategic deployment of Kiswahili in advocating for gender justice demonstrates that a local lingua franca does more than increase accessibility; it secures community trust by situating rights-based discourse within a recognized cultural narrative.

This move from "external directive" to "collaborative dialogue" directly challenges the coloniality of knowledge that characterizes traditional top-down interventions.

This tension is equally palpable in Francophone West Africa, where the enduring pre-eminence of formal French in administrative and NGO reporting creates a bifurcated civic space. While French facilitates access to transnational institutional capital, it simultaneously reinforces socio-economic stratifications, favouring a professionalized elite. However, the work of Tostan in Senegal offers a transformative model through its Community Empowerment Programme (CEP). By eschewing pre-packaged Western terminology in favour of culturally relevant dialogue in local languages, Tostan facilitates a form of "organic development" that promotes collective agency. This approach highlights the potential for subversive re-signification, where communities take ownership of development concepts by stripping them of their technocratic baggage and re-clothing them in local meaning.

Ultimately, the linguistic strategies employed by NGOs—whether through code-switching, strategic translation, or the adoption of indigenous registers—are deliberate political choices with profound ethical implications. In an era of digital mediation, where activism increasingly unfolds on multilingual social media platforms, the gap between formal "donor-speak" and informal "community-speak" is becoming a primary site of contestation. If NGOs cling to an exclusionary, technocratic lexicon, they risk facilitating a depoliticized inclusion that obscures structural inequalities. The efficacy of NGO activism thus hinges on the ability of these organizations to navigate the power dynamics inherent in the language of the "other" and to act not just as speakers for the marginalized, but as facilitators of their interpretive power.

4.2 Community Engagement and Cultural Alignment

Within the crucible of African development, community engagement is frequently heralded as a panacea for the failures of top-down technocracy. Yet, a socio-anthropo-linguistic autopsy of NGO praxis reveals that engagement is less a neutral bridge and more a contested frontier where global development rationalities collide with localized ontologies. Analysis across the Anglophone and Francophone divide suggests that for engagement to be substantive, it must move beyond the "procedural performance" of focus groups and toward a profound semiotic alignment with the community's social fabric.

In the East African context, organizations like the Aga Khan Foundation have pioneered mechanisms that utilize Kiswahili not merely as a tool for information dissemination, but as a site of linguistic hospitality (Odhiambo, 2020). However, the scholarly challenge lies in interrogating the "translation" of abstract neoliberal icons such as sustainability or resilience. When these terms are transposed into local dialects, they often undergo a form of conceptual flattening. The NGO's task is rarely to "translate down" to the community, but rather to "translate up"—navigating the friction between a donor's rigid, linear logframes and a community's relational, often non-linear understanding of well-being. This requires a shift from technocratic expertise to epistemic humility, acknowledging that indigenous survival strategies often possess a complexity that eludes Western "capacity-building" modules.

The Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) provides a compelling case for the power of discursive domestication. By weaving rights-based advocacy into the tapestry of oral tradition utilizing proverbs and allegorical narratives TAMWA reclaims "empowerment" from its antiseptic origins and re-clothes it in local moral authority (TAMWA, 2025). Conversely, the "prestige hierarchies" of Francophone West Africa illustrate the violence of linguistic exclusion. In Senegal, the persistent shadow of formal French in official workshops often enacts an epistemic enclosure, where the subaltern are silenced by the very "participatory" frameworks meant to include them (Sibanda, 2022). In these settings,

engagement becomes a symbolic ritual that preserves the authority of the bilingual elite while relegating indigenous Wolof or Pulaar epistemologies to the periphery.

Furthermore, we must confront the rising influence of digital discursive mediation. In the contemporary landscape, NGO engagement is increasingly filtered through digital dashboards and data-collection apps. This process of "datafication" represents a new frontier of translation, where the multi-vocal, qualitative lived experience of a community is reduced to binary data points for donor consumption. This algorithmic translation risks further distancing the "beneficiary" from the decision-making process, as local voices are stripped of their narrative context to fit into global metrics.

Ultimately, for community engagement to move from proceduralism to pluriversality, NGOs must navigate the "hidden transcripts" of the populations they serve the private discourses of resistance that exist outside the formal workshop (Scott, 1990). True efficacy hinges on the ability to move beyond "using" culture as a logistical tool and toward an emancipatory praxis that honors the community's own linguistic and semiotic resources as the foundational bedrock of development. The goal is a radical redistribution of interpretive power, ensuring that the voices of the community are not just "heard" as data, but are sovereign in the design of their own futures.

4.3 Governance, Accountability, and Policy Influence

In the contemporary African sociopolitical landscape, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have evolved beyond their roles as service providers to become discursive architects of governance. They function as "sovereign intermediaries" that mediate the fraught relationships between localized grassroots movements, state apparatuses, and transnational donor regimes. By treating governance not as a static set of rules but as a contested discursive field, this section interrogates how NGOs utilize linguistic and semiotic resources to redefine accountability and exercise policy influence.

In Kenya, organizations such as Transparency International and the Kenya Human Rights Commission engage in what may be termed "civic pedagogy." By deploying policy briefs and citizen scorecards in both English and Kiswahili, they translate abstract concepts of "transparency" into the vernacular of socio-economic survival (Odhiambo, 2020). However, from a Foucauldian perspective, this is more than an educational exercise; it is the deployment of a "regime of truth" that reshapes the citizen into a monitored and monitoring subject. The framing of corruption in local registers effectively mobilizes public discourse, yet it simultaneously positions the NGO as the primary arbiter of what constitutes "legitimate" governance, often bypassing traditional or indigenous modes of communal arbitration.

In Francophone West Africa, the linguistic and structural hurdles are even more pronounced, leading to complex strategies of epistemic brokerage. In Senegal, Tostan's integration of Wolof and Pulaar into human rights advocacy (Melching, 2025) represents a radical departure from the "linguistic imperialism" of formal French. However, ethnographic evidence from Burkina Faso and Mali suggests that even these linguistically inclusive models are susceptible to "donor-driven teleology." When NGOs depend on local intermediaries or "cultural brokers" to bridge the gap between donor-sanctioned objectives and community needs, they risk reinforcing neo-patrimonial power structures. These intermediaries often act as gatekeepers, filtering community voices to ensure they align with the technocratic expectations of the "NGO-industrial complex" (Luwaga, 2025; Banks & Hulme, 2012).

The work of TAMWA in Tanzania and UMWA in Uganda demonstrates the transformative potential of narrative governance. By weaving maternal health advocacy and gender justice into Kiswahili radio dramas and oral storytelling traditions, these organizations perform a "bottom-up" re-framing of policy (TAMWA, 2025; UMWA, 2025). This aligns with post-development critiques that champion the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" where the lived experience of the marginalized becomes a legitimate basis for policy reform. Yet, a critical paradox remains: as NGOs become more effective at amplifying these voices, they often become the "preferred channel" for dissent, effectively depoliticizing grassroots movements by channeling radical energy into manageable, project-based advocacy (Feng, 2020).

Ultimately, NGO-mediated accountability is never a neutral conduit. It is a site of hybridized governance where donor-sanctioned metrics frequently eclipse locally emergent concerns. When organizational hierarchies or linguistic misalignments dominate, "participation" is reduced to a performative act of "symbolic inclusion," serving the needs of the donor's reporting cycle rather than the community's political agency. For NGOs to achieve substantive policy influence, they must navigate their own positional reflexivity, acknowledging that their discourse can either dismantle structural inequities or serve as a sophisticated tool for their reinstatement. As demonstrated across Kenya, Tanzania, and Senegal, the "battleground of discourse" is where the future of African governance is currently being negotiated between the rigid demands of global capital and the resilient, multi-vocal realities of the African lifeworld.

4.4 NGO Activism and Fields of Intervention

4.4.1 Global–Local Intertextuality in NGO Discourse

NGOs in Africa operate as "semiotic conduits," navigating the complex intertextual space between the universalizing mandates of global development and the granular realities of local lifeworlds. By employing intertextual analysis, we observe how NGO discourses do not merely "reference" international instruments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but actively re-contextualize them to secure institutional legitimacy across divergent scales (Fairclough, 1992; Bazerman, 2004). This process, often termed "vernacularization," is evident in the praxis of Tostan in Senegal. By synthesizing global human rights discourse with indigenous communal dialogue in Wolof and Pulaar, Tostan facilitates a discursive shift regarding female genital mutilation (FGM) that is perceived not as an external imposition, but as a locally negotiated evolution of social norms (Melching, 2025).

However, these intertextual chains are rarely neutral. In Tanzania, the TAMWA's media advocacy demonstrates a sophisticated "double-voicing": the organization must simultaneously speak the technocratic language of the international donor to ensure fiscal survival and the culturally resonant Kiswahili of the grassroots to maintain social trust (TAMWA, 2025). This creates a hybridized discourse where global norms are "domesticated," yet the underlying neoliberal logic of the donor such as the focus on individual over collective rights, often remains embedded in the subtext.

The divergence between Anglophone and Francophone discursive landscapes further complicates this intertextual mediation. In Kenya and Uganda, the rhetoric of "participation" and "empowerment" is frequently framed through the lens of individual agency, reflecting an Anglophone liberal tradition that encourages communities to perform a specific type of "self-governance" (Odhiambo, 2020; Luwaga, 2025). Conversely, in Francophone West Africa, the developmental lexicon often retains a more technocratic, dirigiste character. Here, intertextuality frequently emphasizes compliance and administrative reporting a legacy of

centralized colonial bureaucracies which can subtly reinforce a "culture of dependency" by positioning the NGO as an extension of state-like authority rather than a disruptor of it (Sibanda, 2022).

Ultimately, this intertextual navigation reveals that the "language of development" is not a stable set of signs. Rather, it is a site of friction. When NGOs weave global principles into local advocacy, they are engaged in a political act of "epistemic translation." The success of these interventions depends on whether the NGO allows for a subversive intertextuality where local meanings are allowed to redefine global goals or whether they merely use local language as a decorative mask for a pre-packaged universalist agenda.

4.4.2 Language, Culture, and Socio-Anthropo-Linguistic Mediation

From a socio-anthropo-linguistic perspective, the linguistic choices made by NGOs are not merely logistical they are performative acts of power that delineate social identities and regulate epistemic access. As Blommaert (2005) and Voelkel & Kretzschmar (2021) posit, language functions as a diagnostic of institutional hierarchy; the selection of a specific register can either confer "symbolic capital" upon a community or relegate their indigenous knowledge to the periphery. This dynamic is particularly visible in the "scaling" of development projects, where the linguistic nuances of a local setting are often sacrificed to ensure "linguistic scalability" the ability of a project to be easily reported and replicated across different donor-funded regions (Tesseur, 2022).

When developmental "*universals*" are translated superficially into local vernaculars, the result is often a semantic misalignment. This occurs because Western technocratic language frequently lacks the semiotic equivalents for African relational ontologies concepts of being and community that prioritize interconnectedness over individual achievement (Chilisa, 2019). This leads to a form of "discursive ventriloquism" where local actors repeat donor-sanctioned terms without genuine conceptual ownership. In the Kenyan context, the shift from English-centric frameworks to Kiswahili and regional dialects represents a vital move toward linguistic democratization (Bas-Szymaszek, 2024). However, a Foucauldian analysis suggests that even this vernacularization can be a "double-edged sword." While it facilitates higher engagement, it can also function as a more efficient "technology of the self," allowing global governance rationalities to penetrate more deeply into the local life world under the guise of familiarity.

Furthermore, NGOs must navigate a persistent tension between participatory inclusion and technocratic efficiency. While advocacy-focused groups like Amnesty International attempt to "vernacularize" human rights by linking international frameworks to local struggles against gender-based violence, relief-oriented entities like the Red Cross often operate under a "discourse of urgency" (Delaet, 2006). In these emergency settings, linguistic mediation is frequently sacrificed for logistical speed, leading to what Santos (2014) identifies as "epistemicide" the systematic silencing and destruction of local ways of knowing. By prioritizing standardized protocols over localized meaning-making, these organizations risk reinforcing the very paternalistic structures they aim to alleviate.

Ultimately, the socio-anthropo-linguistic mediation performed by NGOs is a high-stakes negotiation of meaning. To move beyond symbolic participation, NGOs must embrace translanguaging practices where local and global linguistic resources are woven together in a way that allows for "counter-narratives" to emerge (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Efficacy in the African setting, therefore, is not measured by the clarity of the translated text alone, but by the extent to which the linguistic framework allows for a radical redistribution of interpretive authority, ensuring that the community remains the sovereign author of its own developmental narrative.

4.4.3 NGO Typologies and Field-Specific Strategies

The efficacy of NGO activism in Africa is inextricably linked to the diverse organizational typologies that define the sector spanning a spectrum from localized grassroots collectives to transnational behemoths. These entities do not operate with a singular logic; rather, their strategies are shaped by divergent ideologies, funding structures, and geopolitical origins. Scholars have noted that organizations originating in the Global South frequently adopt a collaborative stance with state apparatuses, focusing on collective and socio-economic rights as a means of striking a balance between institutional influence and community accountability (Wouters & Rossi, 2001). Conversely, International NGOs (INGOs) headquartered in the Global North often prioritize liberal civil and political rights, maintaining a discursive distance from state structures that, while preserving their independence, can occasionally erode their local legitimacy and "cultural fit" (Cakmak, 2004).

Identity-based organizations, particularly those focused on gender justice and intersectionality, occupy a unique niche within this typology. These NGOs employ specialized semiotic strategies to amplify marginalized voices, expertly blending localized linguistic mobilization with global advocacy norms (Peterson, 2021). This "transnational advocacy" is a modern iteration of a historical lineage; just as the 19th-century abolitionist movements in Africa had to navigate the tension between moral imperatives and local resistance (Delaet, 2006), contemporary NGOs must reconcile universalist mandates with the specificities of the African lifeworld.

Furthermore, NGOs function as mediators of information, disrupting state monopolies on data and fostering participatory governance (Whaites, 2000). In Kenya, organizations focused on land tenure and agrarian reform such as the Kenya Land Alliance—have utilized a "rights-based discourse" to empower citizen networks. By translating complex legal frameworks into accessible, culturally resonant language, they facilitate a form of social accountability that challenges traditional power hierarchies (Abiddin, 2022; Kithuva & Mogote, 2024).

However, this typological diversity also reveals a critical friction: the "NGO-ization" of social movements can lead to the depoliticization of dissent. When grassroots energy is funnelled into formal NGO structures, it often becomes subject to "donor-friendly" registers and technocratic reporting requirements, potentially diluting the radical nature of the activism. Therefore, the impact of NGO activism is not merely a product of "good communication," but is contingent upon the organization's ability to resist technocratic capture and remain rooted in the authentic social and linguistic contexts of the communities they serve.

4.4.4 Theoretical Integration and Critical Reflection

A synthesis of post-development and Foucauldian perspectives reveals that NGO activism is not an inherently emancipatory force; rather, it is a deeply ambivalent site of power negotiation. While NGOs possess the capacity to catalyse community agency, they simultaneously risk functioning as "neo-colonial proxies" that prioritize donor-sanctioned metrics, elite registers, and Westernized definitions of progress (Escobar, 1995; Banks & Hulme, 2012). This study corroborates the findings of Sondarjee (2024) and Mbembe (2001), suggesting that the "civil society" space in Africa is often a curated theater where "participation" is allowed only insofar as it does not disrupt the underlying neoliberal order.

From a socio-anthropo-linguistic standpoint, this research demonstrates that "empowerment," "participation," and "sustainability" are not neutral descriptors but are contested signifiers whose meanings are dictated by the linguistic and cultural frameworks in which they are embedded. The effectiveness of NGO interventions is thus contingent upon a

radical organizational reflexivity. It is insufficient for an organization to "include" local voices; they must actively dismantle the epistemic hierarchies that privilege the technocratic "Logframe" over the organic "Lifeworld." As argued by Chilisa (2019), the failure to integrate indigenous relational ontologies into development discourse results in a form of "discursive ventriloquism," where local actors repeat exogenous terms to secure resources, masking a lack of genuine conceptual ownership.

The true transformative potential of NGOs lies in their ability to facilitate epistemic justice, a process in which the community's own narratives and linguistic repertoires are recognized as foundational sites of authority, rather than logistical hurdles. This requires a shift from "citizen engagement" to "interpretive sovereignty," where communities are granted the power to define the terms of their own development.

Table 1:

Synthesis of Theoretical Pillars and their Impact on NGO Praxis

Theoretical Pillar	Corroborative Insight	Impact on NGO Praxis
Foucauldian Governmentality	Fairclough (2013); Wodak (2024)	Reveals NGOs as agents that shape subjectivities through "expert" discourse.
Post-Development Theory	Escobar (1995); Sachs (2010)	Challenges the universalist assumption of "progress" and centers local epistemologies.
Socio-Anthropo-Linguistics	Blommaert (2005); Tesseur (2022)	Analyzes how language choice mediates power, access, and interpretive sovereignty.

Ultimately, NGO activism in Africa navigates a precarious web of interdiscursive mediation: they must bridge the gap between global standards and local idioms, between transnational funding and grassroots dissent. Their legitimacy is not derived from the mere delivery of services, but from the extent to which they foster pluriversality the idea of a world where many worlds fit. By weaving together critical discourse, cultural nuance, and local agency, NGOs can move beyond being "translators of the global" to becoming "facilitators of the subaltern." This transition requires a fundamental shift in the development paradigm: from a focus on "saving" the subject to an ethical commitment to listening to the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges."

4.4.5 NGO Activism in the Context of Resource Conflicts and Management

In the contemporary African landscape, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have moved to the vanguard of environmental and extractive industry governance. As contestation over land, water, minerals, and forests intensifies, NGOs increasingly inhabit a discursive "Third Space" (Bhabha, 1994) that mediates the friction between the sovereign state, transnational capital, and the marginalized citizen. However, a socio-anthropo-linguistic interrogation reveals that this space is not a neutral clearing for dialogue; it is a politically charged arena where the very language of "management" can become a tool for epistemic dispossession.

Our analysis suggests that NGOs function as "linguistic gatekeepers" (Hilhorst, 2003) who curate the visibility of grassroots grievances. Through the strategic control of funding proposals and policy briefs, NGOs determine which environmental concerns are framed as "rational" or "development-worthy" and which are dismissed as parochial. Utilizing intertextual mapping, this study illustrates a profound "scaling" requirement: local claims to ancestral land or water rights must typically be translated into the sanitized, globally recognized vocabulary of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) before they accrue institutional legitimacy. This process mirrors Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence,

where the imposition of a dominant technocratic register renders indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the environment socially invisible.

The central tension in resource activism is thus not a binary between "First World" and "Global South" NGOs, but a friction between "donor-centric legibility" and "communal authenticity." This is particularly evident in identity-based activism within extractive zones. Corroborating the insights of Mama (2019), we find that women's rights NGOs achieve substantive impact only when they pivot away from the abstract, "universalist" rhetoric of human rights—often perceived as an exogenous imposition—and instead embrace vernacular feminism. By rooting advocacy in proverbs, kinship structures, and local ecological values, these organizations transform top-down interventions into "countervailing power" (Galbraith, 1954) that resonates with the community's moral economy.

While NGOs are often perceived as more trustworthy than profit-driven corporations (Eade, 2000), their moral authority is inherently fragile. Teshome (2009) notes that the structural dependency on external funding creates a paradoxical "advocacy trap": NGOs must push back against power while remaining tethered to the very financial systems that sustain it. Linguistically, this manifests as "discursive dilution," where the assertive demands of communities—such as total resource sovereignty—are softened into "stakeholder consultations" to suit donor sensibilities.

Furthermore, the rise of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) in resource conflicts (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) presents a dual-edged sword. While TANs provide the organizational scaffolding to challenge multi-national corporations, they often necessitate an "abstracting" of local struggle. As NGO messaging aligns with global climate or conservation goals, the visceral, localized experience of displacement can be eclipsed by technocratic reporting. This shift reinforces a "rhetoric of underdevelopment" that risks positioning communities as passive "beneficiaries" of global protection rather than active political agents.

In sum, whether NGO activism fosters genuine interpretive sovereignty or merely reinforces a sophisticated form of dependency depends on the organization's linguistic reflexivity. NGOs that prioritize culturally resonant communication and honour local ecological identities offer communities the tools to negotiate rights and confront exclusion. Conversely, those that function primarily as translators for the global development machine risk perpetuating the very systems of marginalization they seek to dismantle. Future research must, therefore, treat NGO activism not merely as a set of actions, but as a semiotic battleground where the future of African resource sovereignty is being contested and written.

4.4.6 NGO Activism, Networking, and Alliance Building

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Africa have transitioned from mere project implementers to semiotic architects, weaving multi-scalar networks that connect grassroots lifeworlds with the high-altitude corridors of global policy. These alliances are not merely administrative configurations; they are sites of discursive labour where NGOs mobilize resources by negotiating the friction between localized vernaculars and the "prestige registers" of international development (Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Aberi, 2016). Intertextual analysis reveals that networking is a strategic practice of "semantic braiding," wherein NGOs embed global imperatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate frameworks into local narratives to secure institutional legitimacy. The African Climate Alliance exemplifies this synthesis, coordinating climate action across the Anglophone-Francophone divide by anchoring global "green" nomenclature in indigenous environmental testimonies. Similarly, the multi-state Ebola responses in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone demonstrated that alliance efficacy is predicated on multilingual fluency. During these crises, networks functioned as translational conduits, converting international health protocols into

culturally resonant idioms through oral genres and trusted community registers (Edwards, 2009; Melching, 2025).

From a socio-anthropo-linguistic perspective, the vitality of an alliance is determined by its communicative hospitality. Research from Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire indicates that when coalitions utilize Kiswahili or Wolof alongside formal English or French, they achieve epistemic inclusion rather than mere surface-level compliance (Bas-Szymaszek, 2024; Voelkel & Kretzschmar, 2021). However, Foucauldian critique highlights a persistent "asymmetric horizontalism": larger INGOs often exercise agenda-setting hegemony, where the technical requirements of the donor effectively silence unconventional or indigenous methodologies (Fairclough & Scholz, 2020). This tension, historically mirrored in the African antislavery movements, persists in contemporary women's rights coalitions where transnational platforms risk enacting a "discursive enclosure" if donor-driven gender standards eclipse local kinship and gender ontologies (Sydorenko, 2010; Banks & Hulme, 2012).

Over the last two decades, NGO networking has undergone a radical metamorphosis, shifting from the early 2000s "siloed" approach to contemporary digital advocacy ecosystems. Technological advancements social media, collaborative mapping, and real-time forums—have collapsed the distance between the Sahel and global governance headquarters. Yet, the success of these networks remains contingent upon finding an ethical equilibrium between global frameworks and local agency. The most impactful alliances, such as partnerships between international human rights organizations and local collectives in East Africa, operate through "linguistic humility." By blending universalist narratives with localized storytelling traditions, these partnerships create a "Third Space" of negotiation that fosters meaningful engagement with marginalized groups (Bhabha, 1994).

Ultimately, NGO alliances in Africa are both instruments of resistance and arenas of contestation. Their success hinges on a reflexive praxis that manages linguistic and hierarchical tensions, ensuring that the "art of networking" does not become a sophisticated mask for the erasure of local sovereignty. By blending socio-anthropo-linguistic insights with critical discourse analysis, it becomes evident that achieving sustainable development outcomes requires a move beyond logistical coordination toward the active protection of interpretive sovereignty within every link of the network.

4.4.7 NGO Activism and Inclusive Communication Practices

Beyond the logistical implementation of development projects, NGOs in Africa function as "transnational discursive brokers," weaving together complex networks that navigate the friction between grassroots lifeworlds and global governance regimes. These alliances are not merely administrative configurations; they are semiotic power-maps that determine whose voices are amplified and which narratives accrue policy legitimacy (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Through intertextual analysis, we observe how NGOs strategically "braid" global norms such as the SDGs and climate justice frameworks into local narratives, a process that secures institutional funding while simultaneously attempting to maintain grassroots authenticity.

The African Climate Alliance serves as a primary example of this "discursive coordination." By synthesizing localized testimonies of environmental degradation with high-altitude global policy language, the alliance performs a dual-legitimacy act. However, a socio-anthropo-linguistic lens reveals that these alliances are often sites of "communicative friction." In multilingual contexts like Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, the reliance on formal French for donor reporting often clashes with the indigenous registers required for genuine community mobilization. As Bas-Szymaszek (2024) corroborates in the Kenyan context,

alliances that fail to move beyond English-centric "expert" registers risk falling into "discursive isolation," where the alliance exists on paper but remains invisible to the population it claims to represent.

Furthermore, Foucauldian analysis suggests that NGO networks are often characterized by "asymmetric horizontalism." While alliances claim to be egalitarian, larger INGOs frequently exercise "agenda-setting hegemony," where smaller local organizations are pressured to adopt the linguistic and ideological templates of their donors to remain fiscally viable (Fairclough & Scholz, 2020). This "technocratic capture" can be resisted through reflexive alliance-building, where partnerships between entities like Amnesty International and local Kenyan women's rights groups prioritize "multivoicedness" (heteroglossia). Effective alliances, therefore, are those that transform networking from a logistical exercise into a liberatory discursive practice, ensuring that global resources do not come at the cost of local interpretive sovereignty.

4.4.8 NGO Activism and the Praxis of Inclusive Communication

Communication practices are the primary "engine room" of NGO activism; they are the mechanisms through which legitimacy is manufactured and power is either redistributed or entrenched. Far from neutral channels, NGO communication acts as a "semiotic gatekeeper," validating specific forms of knowledge while rendering others "illegible" to the development machine (Blommaert, 2005). This study argues that inclusive communication is not a peripheral administrative task but a foundational ethical commitment to epistemic justice.

Intertextual mapping reveals a profound divergence in how "participation" is communicated across the Anglophone-Francophone divide. In many Anglophone contexts, participatory rhetoric emphasizes liberal agency, whereas in Francophone settings, the discourse is often embedded within dirigiste bureaucratic registers that prioritize compliance and "reporting-back" over authentic dialogue (Escobar, 1995). To counteract this, inclusive communication must evolve into a socio-anthropo-linguistic engagement with lived realities. The Ebola response in West Africa serves as a critical corroboration: interventions that eschewed "expert" top-down messaging in favour of indigenous oral genres, proverbs, and trusted cultural intermediaries achieved radical shifts in community trust and behavioural uptake (Melching, 2025).

Inclusivity also demands an intersectional communicative strategy. As seen in Kenyan and Senegalese women's rights advocacy, true inclusion requires the creation of "counter-publics" alternative spaces like peer-led forums that bypass the male-dominated or elite-centric "official" workshop (Sydorenko, 2010). While the digital revolution has offered new tools for mobilization, a critical reflection reveals the danger of a "digital divide in discourse," where reliance on social media can exacerbate exclusions linked to literacy and rural connectivity (Banks & Hulme, 2012).

Ultimately, inclusive communication is a subversive act. It requires NGOs to move beyond the "performative inclusion" of donor-mandated checkboxes and toward a model of "horizontal accountability." By centring local languages and narrative-based engagement, NGOs can challenge the Foucauldian "regimes of truth" that favour the expert over the citizen. Meaningful development outcomes, therefore, are not produced by the efficiency of the message, but by the integrity of the dialogue, ensuring that communication serves as a tool for community sovereignty rather than a sophisticated mask for continued dependency.

5.0 Sustainability, Power, and the Future of NGO-Led Development

This concluding analysis synthesizes the study's theoretical and empirical inquiries to interrogate the ontological nature of sustainability within African development. Rather than treating sustainability as a technocratic by-product of project longevity or fiscal solvency, this research posits that it is a radically political and discursive process. Sustainability serves as a site of negotiation where power dynamics and semiotic practices dictate whose epistemologies are validated and whose visions of the future are deemed legitimate. Consequently, the trajectory of NGO-led development is determined not by the volume of external intervention, but by the ethical integrity of the communicative encounter and the redistribution of interpretive authority.

Throughout the developmental arc, NGOs operate as the primary architects of narrative, utilizing policy instruments and advocacy repertoires to craft "regimes of truth." Drawing upon Foucauldian and post-development perspectives, the study demonstrates that sustainability is frequently articulated through globally circulating tropes such as "resilience," "capacity-building," and "participation," which often originate within neoliberal donor regimes. While these constructs possess an inherent emancipatory promise, their uncritical re-contextualization into the African lifeworld often facilitates a "semantic bleaching" of local agency. This process risks reducing the community to a pathologized recipient of aid rather than a sovereign political subject, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations under the guise of progress (Fairclough, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Taleb, 2020; Bekkai & Benkechida, 2025).

A core finding of this research is that sustainability outcomes are inextricably tethered to the concept of communicative sovereignty. Interventions that prioritize indigenous languages, oral historiographies, and collaborative meaning-making foster a "moral economy of trust" that technocratic, English- or French-centric models fail to replicate (Blommaert, 2005; Voelkel & Kretzschmar, 2021). As corroborated by contemporary studies in governance and health advocacy, when NGOs eschew "expert" registers in favour of vernacularized discourse, development initiatives are more likely to be organically assimilated and sustained by local actors. Conversely, exclusionary or overly technical communication reproduces a pathology of dependency, where the requirement to conform to exogenous linguistic standards stifles authentic participation.

Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, sustainability functions as a mechanism of governmentality, influencing the criteria for institutional success and failure. NGOs often maintain their authority by controlling the metrics of evaluation and the prestige registers of reporting, creating a "participation paradox" (Fairclough & Scholz, 2020). In this setting, local institutions and community members are frequently compelled to perform a specific type of "sustainable" behaviour adopting donor-sanctioned vocabularies to secure recognition and resources. This dynamic suggests that sustainability can become a performative gesture, providing a veneer of progress while leaving the structural roots of inequality untouched.

Furthermore, the study highlights the ambivalent role of transnational advocacy networks in shaping sustainable outcomes. While these coalitions amplify policy influence, post-development critiques warn that they can prioritize global norms over localized needs when reflexive accountability is absent (Banks & Hulme, 2012). Genuine sustainability, therefore, is not a product of networking volume but of how power and authority are shared within those networks. It requires a shift from "owning" the developmental narrative to facilitating "pluriversal spaces" where multiple ways of knowing can coexist.

Ultimately, the future of NGO-led development in Africa hinges on a transition from interventionalism to reflexivity. The empowerment-dependency dilemma is not a series of isolated failures but a structural feature of the political economy of aid and the uneven valuation of global versus local knowledge systems. Sustainability cannot be delivered unilaterally; it must be co-authored. For genuine transformation to occur, NGOs must adopt a decolonial praxis that prioritizes epistemic humility, linguistic restraint, and a commitment to long-term relationality over short-term project metrics. The success of the sector will be measured by its willingness to dismantle its own discursive hegemonies in favor of a partnership that honors the sovereignty of the subaltern.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study establishes that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Africa operate as far more than mere logistical conduits for aid; they are pivotal discursive agents that actively interpret, mediate, and construct the narratives of development. The language deployed by these organizations and the ideological weight it carries serves as a primary determinant of community subjectivity. Whether a population is mobilized as a sovereign agent of change or pathologized as a passive recipient of charity depends significantly on the socio-anthropo-linguistic strategies employed by the NGO.

Throughout the Anglophone and Francophone landscapes, foundational constructs such as "empowerment," "participation," and "capacity-building" migrate from the high-altitude frameworks of international donors into localized lifeworlds. However, this study demonstrates that this migration is rarely a neutral translation; it is a semiotic transformation. Our analysis of climate advocacy in Kenya and Senegal, the Ebola response in West Africa, and women's rights coalitions in Côte d'Ivoire provides a compelling corroboration: developmental efficacy is inextricably linked to linguistic hospitality. When NGOs root their interventions in multilingualism and cultural resonance, they foster authentic engagement. Conversely, where a disconnect exists between the technocratic "prestige register" of the donor and the vernacular of the community, participation is reduced to a symbolic performance, effectively stalling the potential for structural transformation.

Furthermore, while the networking and alliance-building capabilities of NGOs are indispensable for resource mobilization and policy amplification, they are often fraught with structural asymmetries. The dominance of larger, transnational NGOs can inadvertently enact a "discursive enclosure," where the specificities of locally rooted organizations and indigenous knowledge systems are marginalized to meet the standardized reporting demands of global capital. Grounded in Foucauldian and post-development theories, this study concludes that the sustainability of NGO-led development is not a function of fiscal longevity, but of epistemic justice. True sustainability is achieved only when organizations move beyond the "management" of people and toward the facilitation of pluriversal dialogue.

6.1. Recommendations

Institutionalizing Linguistic Sovereignty and Reflexivity: NGOs must transition from superficial translation to a model of linguistic hospitality. This involves the co-creation of development materials/policy briefs, advocacy texts, and educational campaigns directly within the linguistic ecologies of the community. By adopting translanguaging practices that validate local dialects and oral genres as legitimate registers for reporting, organizations ensure that constructs like "empowerment" are not merely imported but are conceptually owned by the people they serve. This localized integration effectively dismantles the "prestige hierarchies" of colonial languages, transforming health and governance programs into culturally resonant sites of engagement.

Decentralizing Interpretive Power and Alliance Governance: To dismantle the "agenda-setting hegemony" inherent in many transnational networks, NGO alliances must adopt inclusive governance structures. This requires larger organizations to exercise epistemic restraint, allowing local grassroots organizations to define the metrics of success based on indigenous values rather than exogenous Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). By rotating leadership roles and establishing community advisory boards, networks can ensure that agenda-setting is a participatory process. Such a shift ensures that the political and discursive goals of a project are defined by those with the greatest stake in its outcome, rather than by donor-driven imperatives.

Prioritizing Horizontal Accountability and Context-Sensitive Monitoring: The primary audience for development discourse must shift from the donor to the community. NGOs should recalibrate their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks to prioritize qualitative and ethnographic methods that measure linguistic comprehension, cultural relevance, and the inclusion of marginalized voices. "Success" should be redefined through the lens of horizontal accountability, where the depth of local ownership and the strengthening of civic literacy outweigh the fluency of technocratic, donor-centric reporting.

Reforming Donor Frameworks through Decolonial Pedagogy: International donors and practitioners alike must embrace a decolonial pedagogical approach that prioritizes cultural humility and reflexive flexibility. This requires moving away from "technical capacity-building" which often implies a deficit in the community toward a model of flexible funding that accommodates local adaptation.

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